

50 YEARS OF KOMETS HOCKEY



Ryan Taylor
Don F. Graham

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50 Years of Komets Hockey A Players' History

“I just wanted to play.”

– Todd Strueby

“The IHL was a man’s league.”

– Robbie Laird

“To be called up, that’s a great feeling. You always dream.”

– Brent Gretzky

“We were just happy to be there.”

– Gerry Sillers

“After you’ve retired, still in August and September you get these dreams you have to get ready for camp. It makes you sick. It still happens after fifteen years, I have bad dreams about it, I’ve broken my laces, lost my skates.”

– Martin Burgers

“He wasn’t mean enough for the NHL.”

“He didn’t have the size or he’d have been up there.”

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**Ryan Taylor
Don F. Graham**

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On the cover: Lionel Repka in a classic hockey pose.

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To all who, of their time and generosity,
made this historical book possible,
and especially

to Marge

wife of Don, friend of Ryan,
and an inspiration to all who know her,
for her patience and fortitude in putting up with the both of us.

MARGE FOR PRESIDENT

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Moe Bartoli; Marc Boileau; Ralph Keller; Gregg Pilling; Robbie Irons; Western Union; Ron Leef; Terry McDougall; Steve Salvucci; Robin Bawa; Carey Lucyk; Wally Schreiber; Barry Scully; MiG Line; Boudreau & Sims; 1992-93 team; Pokey Reddick; Jean-Marc Richard; Colin Chin; Ian Boyce; Scott Gruhl; Guy Dupuis; Franke brothers; 2001-02 team. Bob McCusker & Gus Braumberger: 1958 Indy dressing room. Lionel Repka: 1959-60 team with Dave Thomas. Terry Ewasiuk: 1976-77 team. Dr. Marvin Priddy: Priddy and Laird. Steve Fletcher: his pro card.

What follows grew out of conversations with players, other team members and fans who care about the Komets. It represents the players' experience with the game. Not all the Komets are mentioned, but many are. Some are seen close up, some only in a passing glimpse. The close-ups examine not only stars but also journeyman players without whom the stars could not shine. The players' memories determined the format and stories to be told.

There are very few standard hockey statistics included. The authoritative listing for Komets stats is Blake Sebring's *The Komets Book of Records: 45 Years of Fort Wayne Hockey, 1952-1996*, published by *The News-Sentinel*.

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Bob Chase; Colin Chin; Colin Lister; Bob McNeil; Lionel Repka; David
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WRIST SHOT

Ian Boyce; Gus Braumberger; George Drysdale; Kelly Hurd; Robbie
Irons; Joe Kastelic; Reggie Primeau; Norm Waslawski

“I wanted to play so bad.”

– Tom McVie

“There’s an old hockey saying: hard work beats talent if talent doesn’t work hard.”

– Robin Bawa

“Having no fear makes you play well.”

– George Stanutz

“Consistency is what you want in a hockey player.”

– Lionel Repka

“Two of the best goaltenders I ever saw were crazy as bedbugs.”

– Len Thomson

A Team Takes Shape

At first, the idea of a hockey franchise in Fort Wayne might not have seemed like a great idea. Indiana's sport is basketball, and in the early 1950s, Fort Wayne had one of the best teams in the country, the Zollner Pistons. The construction of the War Memorial Coliseum was in part spurred on by the Pistons' need for a suitable place to play.

The fact was, the new Coliseum also offered the opportunity for a hockey team, who could share the venue with the Pistons. Fort Wayne happened to have a pair of entrepreneurial businessmen who were interested in taking a chance on hockey.

Harold Van Orman's name was known to everyone in the city, because he owned the Van Orman Hotel, a downtown showplace, and the Daisies women's baseball team. Ernie Berg did not know much about hockey, but he knew about promoting public interest. Ramon Perry, a lawyer, was the third partner.

Van Orman attended an International Hockey League meeting in Toledo to discuss the possibility of starting an IHL franchise in Fort Wayne. Teams in the IHL were often financially insecure and they had a tendency to fold unexpectedly. The other owners suggested to Van Orman that he would have to come up with an initial fee. His response was to pull out his wallet and offer to pay it then and there, in cash. His new IHL colleagues were dazzled, and the as yet unnamed Komets were born. Fort Wayne was usually the smallest city in the IHL, matched only by Troy, Ohio for a short time. On the other hand, the Komets would top the league in attendance.

What the team needed was an experienced and knowledgeable coach to get the team started. Alex Wood of the Toledo Mercurys was the choice. The owners placed an ad in *The Hockey News* saying players were wanted, and had a flood of applications. "Some of them didn't even have skates," said Bob Chase.

Wood had been a goalie during his own career, when he played mostly in the AHA (forerunner of the AHL). He'd also played a single game in the NHL, in the 1936-37 season. He'd been a success in Toledo. He also had a lot of contacts in the Ottawa Valley area of Ontario, where many of the first Komets came from. He had coached both Edgar Blondin and Billy Watson in junior there.

In 1952, the new team owners held free clinics at the Coliseum, to demonstrate what hockey was about and whip up some interest. There were thousands of requests for tickets. The demonstration game was a

huge success. Don Myers says it included examples of minor penalties and some staged fights, to show what a real game was like. Alex Wood knew what the public wanted.

The first training camp was held in Oakville, Ontario. All the early training camps were held in Ontario, because there were inexpensive rinks available there, and because all the players were Canadian anyway. Other early Komets training camps were in Woodstock and Niagara Falls. In Oakville, the hockey players practiced in the morning and played baseball in the afternoon.

On the way to Fort Wayne from training camp, the team stopped at the border so its all-Canadian players could arrange their work permits. Edgar Blondin's papers were not in order, so the rest went on and left him in Windsor. That night, he went for a walk, got lost and had to phone Fort Wayne to ask Ernie Berg the name of his hotel.

When the players arrived in Fort Wayne, they were housed at the Van Orman Hotel. George Drysdale said, "Van Orman was a great man to play for, he treated us royally." Most of the players quickly found places to board or apartments, but George liked the hotel. Eventually Van Orman told him that it was time to go. "Find yourself a place to live by the end of the week, or I'll find one for you."

Because of his other business interests, Van Orman was not involved in the day-to-day running of the team. That was left to Ernie Berg. Ray Perry took care of legal matters and did some announcing at the games.

"Van Orman and Perry were two of the most honest men I've ever met," said Ken Ullyot. His first contract with the team (in 1958) was written on the back of a Kent cigarette package. Berg named the team, changing the c in 'comet' to a K in honor of his wife Katherine.

They were ready for the first season. There were those who thought hockey in Fort Wayne was a flash in the pan. Hilliard Gates, the city's leading sportscaster, spoke of it as 'a fad.'

The First Goal

The 1952-53 season saw a six-team IHL: Cincinnati, Troy (Ohio), Toledo, Grand Rapids, Fort Wayne and Milwaukee. The basketball Pistons had first choice of the venue, and Fred Zollner preferred Sunday evening, when they had always played. The Komets had Saturday night, a good opportunity for them.

Berg was so optimistic about the team's success, he told Coliseum manager Don Myers that the team would sell out the arena shortly. Don laughed and said he doubted it, but Ernie was certain and they had a small wager. The third game or so sold out.

The first Komet goal was scored by the team captain, George Drysdale. He can't remember it. "I had a good backhand shot," he says. "I'd like to think that was the first goal." It was. George scored 31 goals that season, to end with 59 points, leading the K's in scoring.

He had played his junior hockey in Toronto with the Marlboros, and then was enticed to Stratford by the promise of a new pair of skates. He began his pro career in Chatham, Ontario, with the IHL Maroons in 1950. He had a good season, ending up second on the team with 35 goals and 69 points.

When Alex Wood invited Drysdale to come to Fort Wayne, he declined. He was on the all-star team and expected a raise in Chatham. They weren't willing, so he asked Wood if the Komets would match the amount he wanted. Wood said yes.

The amount in question was ten dollars. Drysdale and Jack Stewart of the Red Wings met in a hotel and discussed the matter late into the night over a case of beer. Told about the Komets offer, Stewart scoffed. The next morning, when he came round to discuss it further, Drysdale was gone. "You did your own dealing in those days," he said.

"Alex scrambled a good bunch of guys together that year," says Drysdale. It wasn't easy launching a new team, and they didn't do well, but they didn't end up bottom of the league, either. Milwaukee did.

The top scorers on the team were Drysdale, Eddie Long, Vic DiMarco and Jack Timmins, who had been George's teammate in Chatham the season before. Ed "Bulldog" Calhoun and Len Wharton had the big penalty minutes.

To get hockey going, the players associated with people as much as possible. In the days before helmets, fans could recognize them on the ice, although, as George discovered, they didn't necessarily notice them outside the rink.

One evening Mrs. Drysdale suggested they go to Franke Park to skate. Drysdale took a stick and gloves with him, and found fifteen or so kids choosing up. George asked to play and was chosen last; traditionally the last chosen plays goal, so he did. He did manage to score a goal, however. One of the kids asked, "Who is that old guy?" He was 25. They never did realize who he was.

George had learned to skate backward from a figure skater early in life, and it was a handy skill. He started as a defenseman because of his backward skating abilities, but changed to right wing, where he stayed. "I very seldom went out of my zone," he said. "I wasn't a great playmaker, but my greatest asset was a real heavy shot. When I got to the top of the faceoff circle, that baby was launched. I didn't hesitate. I used the defencemen as decoys."

In his second season, George scored a hat trick in the first period during a game in Toledo. "I was in the right place at the right time," he remembers. "Then in the second and third periods, nothing. I was trying too hard."

In the 1954-55 season, George was in the top ten in IHL scoring when disaster struck. He got hit when he wasn't looking, 'a real good hit.' He had trouble breathing for a time afterward. He seemed to recover, but became ill suddenly as the team was leaving for a road trip. "I felt like I was floating away," he said. The newspapers reported it as a heart attack, but after he'd spent a month in the hospital, George's doctors still could not make a firm diagnosis. His doctor, Raymond Berghoff, was also a hockey fan. He advised retirement and George reluctantly agreed. He was only 27. In his *News-Sentinel* column, Bob Renner called him one of the 'most dependable, sturdy and talented performers.'

Drysdale's connection with the team has never weakened over fifty years. He played in oldtimers games and worked with Bob Chase as a color man during broadcasts on WOWO. "He didn't get any money," said Chase, "But we drank a lot of beer."

The first season was a good memory for the early players. The Coliseum sold out when Cincie came; they were top of the league. The Komets couldn't beat them, but the fans wanted to see them try.

Alex Woods' coaching style was easygoing. Chase called him 'a happy go lucky guy.' "It was too easy," said Drysdale. Ivan Walmsley, who played with Alex in Toledo, said, "A winning style is the only style. If you got harmony, that's what a coach is for. You all have to work together, off the ice as well as on. Alex could do that."

Len Wharton's memory of Alex is "a great guy. He was good to us—he'd say, 'If anybody goes drinking and I'm not invited, you're in trouble.'"

Alex Wood does deserve plenty of credit for creating the team and getting it launched. The Komets of 1952-53 were his team.

Getting Started in Hockey

As the players describe their early years in hockey, the most interesting thing is that the stories are so similar. They start skating early and progress to pickup games on backyard rinks, then league hockey through the various levels, junior or college hockey as a training ground, the draft and NHL training camp, the arrival to play in an unknown mid-western city.

Both Kelly Hurd and Doug Rigler started skating at age two. Ian Boyce could see lots of other kids skating and playing, and begged for his first skates at three. Once a boy had skates, there was always a hockey game going on that he could join.

Other players started late. Doug Teskey lived in Florida, so he came to hockey at nine, Gus Braumberger at ten, Steve Fletcher at eleven. George Stanutz, growing up in northern Ontario, found no organized hockey until he was fifteen, although there were always pickup games around.

The most dramatic start in hockey belongs to Terry Pembroke. As a boy, he got in with a bad crowd and at age eleven was facing a court charge. His grandfather saved him by proposing an alternative: go to reform school, or play hockey. The police chief in Meaford, Ontario, his home town, was also the hockey coach. Terry chose hockey and his life changed.

For Canadian children at this time, there were rinks everywhere. If you had a lake or pond, as soon as it froze solid you were ready. Boards were put up in parks, and the resulting space flooded. Some parks did not even need the boards. Back yards were perfect for small ice surfaces where games of two or three boys could be played, or simply for shooting practice. In those days of less automobile traffic, you could also play in the street. John Hilworth's comment, "I'd rather play than watch," probably represents the feelings of many young Canadians.

These rinks were all outdoors. "The only time we played indoors," says Doug Rigler, "Was for the championship game." When Eddie Long first began playing on indoor rinks, he found he had headaches from the heat! There was only one indoor rink in Ottawa when he was growing up. Tom McVie's rink was visible from the school window; "I never paid much attention to school, I was looking at the rink," he says.

The outdoor rinks had longer lifespans in the north. Carey Lueyk says his neighborhood rinks in Winnipeg stayed frozen from November

until March, ready for 'shinny games.' The parks near Len Thomson's and Ron Burman's boyhood homes were flooded by local firemen. (Although firemen did not flood the parks in Fort Wayne, they did spray the lake in Reservoir Park to create a smooth skating surface.)

Bob Chase's experience in northern Michigan describes a dream winter's day for many boys: "We lived in the bush, so there were no rinks. We skated on the pond. We'd shovel it off all morning, skate until dark and then make a fire of old tires to skate at night."

League hockey began at different times in different places, although where it was the National Sport, there were pressures to have leagues for very young boys. If you were good, the word got out quickly. Lots of boys were good, too, because they had all been at it day and night since they could stand up on the ice. Asked about his own speed, Eddie Long said, "Everybody has it up there."

There were scouts watching even boys of ten or twelve, or a perceptive coach might pass on the word. The NHL teams had contacts everywhere, and if a boy showed talent, they would move to sign him up early, before another team had the chance. This was done using the C-form. For a signing fee, the boy and his parents pledged to play in the future for that particular team. Harold Cotton of the Boston Bruins came to Sudbury and signed Moe Bartoli for \$100. The amounts varied, but they were small considering the agreement being made. Even a hundred dollars, in the 1950s, seemed like a lot of money to a boy of fourteen.

Once the years of learning in midget and bantam were done, there was the leap to junior. If you made it to a good junior team, you might have a chance to go up. Everyone knew what that meant, so you wanted to try, even if it meant leaving home.

Colin Chin left home at twelve, to play in Toronto. "It was tough living away from home." John Hilworth was fifteen, and if his parents had doubts, he did not. "If I went, I could play. That's what I wanted."

"At seventeen, I went to major junior camps in southern Ontario," said Jim Logan, "I was asked to stay by the Ottawa 67s, but I went home. I wanted to stay at home. I was playing for fun and never expected to play pro then." For many, the choice to stay home closed the door on going any further.

Coaches in the house leagues or local teams were probably men with an interest in the sport, or somebody's dad. On reaching junior, the players met up with men whose lives, whose careers, were focused on hockey. If the players were newly living away from home as well, the

hockey coach was not only boss on the ice, he often played a role as a parent-figure off it.

Although George Stanutz had a late start in Timmins, he had tried out for a juvenile team and showed his talent. By the age of seventeen, he belonged to Boston and moved to Toronto to play for St. Mike's (Junior A). His coach there was Joe Primeau, who had spent eight seasons with the Toronto Maple Leafs. "He was a patient teacher," said George. "But a lot of hockey in those days was what you picked up on your own. There were no experts." Playing in Toronto had a special thrill. "On Saturday afternoons we played the Marlies [Toronto Marlboros, the Leafs' junior team] in Maple Leaf Gardens in front of twelve or thirteen thousand people." It was a long way from Timmins.

Bill Richardson agreed about the coaching. He had been limited to high school hockey, not junior, and he says, "In Valleyfield [Quebec, where he played senior hockey] we would practice but we were not coached, instructed. By the time you're twenty-one, you're supposed to know that stuff and that was the end of that. Back then they didn't have the system they do now, no play patterns or set-ups." Over time, the quality of coaching given to teenagers has improved.

Some were luckier. Gerry Randall says, "I had the two best coaches in hockey, Scotty Bowman and Ken Ullyot, but they were very different to play for." Gerry followed Chuck Adamson in goal in Peterborough, Ontario, in the early sixties. "Once we were playing in Guelph, I had an 8-0 shutout. Scotty walked by without a word. There was strict discipline in the dressing room. I loved every minute of it."

Some players had a mentor or just an older admired role model. George Kotsopoulos tried to be like Gilbert Perrault, "he was so quick and good with the puck." It is not surprising to find that the most-mentioned names in this category are Wayne Gretzky and Bobby Orr.

Occasionally a boy might get to meet one of his hockey heroes. Young Eddie Long led his league in scoring in 1944, when he was eleven. His prize was a knife, presented to him by the legendary Maple Leaf star King Clancy.

Inspiration might also come from another traditional source, books. Doug Teskey found Vladislav Tretyak's *The Art of Goaltending* a help, and in college, Ken Dryden's *The Game*. Dryden's thoughtful and intelligent reflections, by someone who had played in the NHL, had a big impact on both players and fans.

Some players did not have an opportunity to play junior. Their alternative was senior hockey. This was played by men over twenty who had not gone on to the pro leagues, but was also open to younger players who could keep up. In his teens, Bob McNeil worked in the mines in Timmins and played senior before he graduated to pro.

Through the time they played peewee, midget and bantam hockey, there were chances to see how talented players were, to learn how much the game meant to them and to discover the world that hockey represented. Those who progressed on to junior were in the process of moving toward being professionals. At the Buffalo Sabres training camp after a career in college hockey, Ian Boyce observed, "Lots of kids in Canada played junior A. It was similar to the NHL. My background was not as tough as those guys."

In junior, players also got a glimpse of how things were done in the way of making the team and getting traded. Players on the Markham Waxers automatically got to attend the Marlies' training camp. Dave Norris was one of two Waxers who made the Marlies. "I had no business making the team. It was the biggest accomplishment of my career," he says, and then, considering his future, "I knew I had to bring something to the table." Norris had beat out John Anderson, future NHL player and Komet star. Anderson was only sixteen, and Norris seventeen. The powers that be decided Anderson could spend another year in the lower ranks. Norris took up the tough guy role, thinking, "If my fighting was good, they couldn't discover I was lousy."

At the Marlies' Christmas party, the coach asked Norris to step outside, and informed him he was being traded to Hamilton, 'the worst team in junior hockey.' Being traded unexpectedly was an experience many players would have, sooner or later.

College hockey was an alternative that became more available as time went on, although it was an option even in the 1950s. George Stanutz turned down a chance to play at the University of Michigan, and Bob McCusker took up a scholarship at Colorado College, graduating before he played in Fort Wayne, becoming, in Polinuk's phrase, 'a good up and down hockey player who should have gone to the NHL.' Many players in later decades, from Ron Ulyot to Doug Teskey, played college hockey.

Was it good training for playing pro? "College hockey is quicker, with no masks and bigger ice, a more open game," said Teskey. There

is less fighting in college hockey, but most players seem able to make that adjustment easily when they move to the pro leagues.

Through it all there would be the dream, that one day you might get to play in the NHL. "I dreamt of being in the NHL, but I didn't think it was possible," says Teskey, "I was at an NHL training camp before I thought it was possible."

These days, when there are so many NHL teams across both Canada and the United States, it may be hard to envision what the NHL meant in the 1940s and 1950s. The games were far away, but they were broadcast on the radio. George Polinuk, who grew up in rural Manitoba, remembered, "You'd lie on the floor listening to those hockey games on Saturday night and you'd never believe you'd be there." Maple Leaf Gardens and the Forum in Montreal were like faraway shrines.

Seeing an NHL game was exciting. Growing up in Montreal, Ian Boyce had a better chance than some to get to the games. "My father told me the Forum was haunted. It was the ghosts that made the Canadiens win. I felt their presence even as a spectator." Reflecting on what he learned at the Canadiens' games, he said, "I'm a hockey purist—you know what I grew up watching."

Television broadcasts brought the NHL games closer, but the mystery was still there. When the day came that a player found himself in the Forum dressing room, there was no doubt the place had an aura that had nothing to do with old hockey jerseys. "I thought of all those old players," said Steve Fletcher, "I was following them."

If you did make it, you might find yourself opposite a famous face on the ice. Paul Shmyr and John Hilworth had similar experiences with the same NHL superstar.

"I got to play against Gordie Howe," remembered Hilworth. "He elbowed me in the corner. Anybody else had done that I'd have dropped my gloves, but he's my idol." Shmyr, also elbowed in a corner, said, "I didn't get him back. I had too much respect for him."

The difficulty was that there were a limited number of places on the pro teams. George Drysdale explains, "There were six teams in the NHL, six in the IHL, six in the western league, six in the AHL. If you didn't make one of those you went home and grabbed a lunch pail."

Teams were also smaller in those days. In the IHL in the fifties, the team consisted of twelve players. That did not leave much room for new faces, if the old faces had settled in for long careers. Jean Beliveau

stayed with the Canadiens for nineteen seasons, Rocket Richard for eighteen and Bernie Geoffrion for twelve.

After the NHL expanded, there were more places, and the other leagues also had more teams. In the early 1970s, teams seemed to be signing everyone, but by 1975, there were too many committed players. No matter how big the market, there are always more boys who want to play than there are places on the bench.

When they had the chance, the players went to the training camp of whatever team owned them. "I was very nervous," said Kelly Hurd, "The first year was a learning experience and I was with a Red Wing I knew. The second year, I knew I wasn't going to make it. They had more than 60 players under contract, it was too many." The Red Wings sent players to San Diego, Toledo and the Adirondacks as well as Fort Wayne. Tom McVie, an NHL coach, confirms that 'kids were used as punching bags for a week.' Ray Brownlee called it 'disillusioning.'

Martin Burgers said that the training camps were an adjustment. "In the towns where we grew up, we were the superstars. It was a tough moment when you get in that pool of people who are all as good as you."

Len Thomson was a regular at the Montreal Canadiens training camp. "I was always owned by the Canadiens. At their camp, they knew where you were going before you got there." This view is shared by most players. However, Len enjoyed the experience and got to know the big Canadian names in the bar after practice.

Gerry Randall said his training camp was "the worst experience I had. I was just someone to shoot at." Perhaps the young goalies had a worse time than most. Chuck Adamson said, "The Canadiens had a junior or minor league goalie in the stands all the time to replace either team's goalie if they got hurt. It was a waste of time."

Training camps at other levels were much the same. When John Goodwin went to training camp in Calgary, he was very aware it was only one step down from the NHL. When Ian Boyce went to AHL training camps as a free agent in the nineties, he said it was 'like going into a slaughterhouse.'

Carey Lucyk had a more positive notion. "I think now American players have a better chance to move up. More people want to see you move up." He knew that he was pegged to go to the IHL all along, but he enjoyed training camp in Springfield (Mass.) and the exhibition games. "Part of the fun for me was playing against guys with NHL experience. 'You're in the NHL. Let's see if I can stop you.'"

Players would go to training camp psyched for an all-out effort to impress the many watching eyes. It was dispiriting to think that one false move might ruin your chances for good.

Robbie Laird's training camp with the Pittsburgh Penguins was a disaster. "My first shift on the ice, I collided with Bernie Lukowich and broke my wrist. I was on the ice twenty seconds total. I was sent home with the prospect of going to Hershey."

Dave Norris had a different kind of bad luck. "I had a good training camp in New Haven. At an exhibition game against the Rangers, I had a breakaway against [Eddie] Giacomin. I hit the goal post. The next day I was sent to Fort Wayne."

News about the players might also affect how the authorities saw them. "I'd had a bad concussion in my first year with Lethbridge [in junior]," said Doug Rigler, "That affected my NHL chances."

When the news came that a player was going somewhere else, it might be hard to understand. "I went to the Oilers training camp," said Teskey, "Played a rookie game, did well. They sent me to Hamilton."

There are many reasons why decisions are made as they are, often with no explanation. It might be better not to know. Jack Button of the Washington Capitals said to Doug Rigler, "You're too small and not durable enough." Rigler said, "This can still happen. It's one man's comment based on their own ideas about what a player should be and a whole career is affected. A guy needs to stand out or have an outstanding word of mouth in order to survive."

Some players actually enjoyed training camp tryouts. Martin Burgers describes his first camp for the Capitals as the best experience of his life. "I played so well," he says, "As well as I could have. I was well prepared and confident." The result was the same, however. "They had too many guys under contract. They had nine guys under contract in Hershey and only six could play. So Vic Morin and I were sent here."

Rookies might have a difficult time breaking into a team with established relationships. Bob McNeil says, "Rookies learned to mind their own business," and recounts that Ross Turnbull was unhappy in 1954-55 because of that attitude. Turnbull stayed with the Komets for only seventeen games. Len Thomson agreed that it was difficult. "The guys tended to stay around each other and it was hard for new guys. It took a while. Some of us always tried to take rookies under our wing."

One aspect of training camp was the physical checkup. Said Gregg Pilling, "All they did was check your teeth and stick their finger up your ass and all you could hope was they did the teeth first."

Players did their own contract negotiations in the days before agents. "We didn't think of it as a business, just as a sport in those days," said Ted Wright. Even in the late eighties, Carey Lucyk was negotiating his own contract. He had clear ideas about the differences between a defenseman's and a forward's needs. "My contract was not based on goals scored, it was based on goals against, on shutouts. I think this was unique, I don't know that anyone else had it."

Pete Wywrot liked to be free at the end of each season to negotiate with a new team, if he wanted, so he obtained a release making him a free agent. "It was really slavery in those days," said Lois Wywrot. She remembered moving more than a dozen times in seven years.

The uncertainties of training camp, being sent from team to team until a match was made, often foreshadowed a career's worth of moving around. "It's part of what you have to do," says Brent Gretzky, "You go where there's a job." He acknowledged that, 'with kids you feel more tied down.' In fact, a number of players linked the arrival of their first children to the decision to retire from hockey, to provide a more stable environment (and income) for the family.

For many, changing teams offers chances for new challenges and a fresh outlook. Playing is the important thing. Bobby Rivard said, "Wherever I was playing was okay with me as long as I was playing. Anyway, you get to know people very quickly."

Moving to Fort Wayne, or the IHL as compared with the AHL, might also be a good idea if it meant playing more. Jim Logan had not expected to go on playing hockey after his college career, but he had a friend at the Kalamazoo training camp. He ended by signing an NHL contract with Dallas and playing at their IHL farm team in Kalamazoo. However, he did not find himself playing as much as he liked. When the opportunity to move to the UHL in Fort Wayne came, he took it.

Hockey players want to play. Initial disappointment about not being in the NHL could be replaced by the sheer pleasure of the job. "It's a kid's game and you're getting paid for it," exults Steve Fletcher.

Terry Pembroke agrees. "The greatest thing that happened in my minor pro career was coming here. I saw others playing their way through the leagues and I didn't want it happening to me. Playing hockey beats having a real job, and delays having to grow up. In real life you

wait to prove yourself. In hockey you can do it right now, and you get another chance the next day.”

As for Colin Chin, “I grew up being told I was too small for the NHL. I told myself, ‘I don’t have to go up there to prove myself.’ My reaction to people who say, ‘Don’t you wish you’d played in the NHL?’ is, ‘I think there are lots of guys out there who wish they were me.’ My experiences here were unique.” Doug Teskey, as usual, has a short answer: “If you’re an asset to the team, that takes care of business.”

So what were the circumstances that brought individual players to Fort Wayne? Here are some stories:

John Hilworth: Tony Horvath showed up at my home in Jasper, Alberta, with a message from Ken Ulliyot. It was August, he was scouting for the Komets. I’d never heard of the place. Ulliyot had seen me play in Wichita. I told them I wouldn’t go all that way to try out, I wanted a contract, so they offered me one and I came. The money was bad but at least I could play.

Robbie Irons: I was owned by the New York Rangers and I was supposed to sign with Omaha, but I broke my arm in the summer and missed training camp. When I was ready to play, Omaha was full, so I was offered to Ken Ulliyot and flew here.

Ted Wright: Norm Waslawski told Ulliyot about me. I came at Christmas. Eddie Shore wanted me to go to Seattle. I couldn’t stand Eddie Shore.

Reg Primeau: Ken Ulliyot coached me for three years in Prince Albert from the time I was seventeen.

Ron Burman: I was playing in Port Huron. On a road trip to Dayton, six of us lost our bags—they were left behind. Our coach, Jerry Toppazzini, said we could use some discarded Dayton gear, but we said no. We refused to play. He put the six on waivers to punish us. He meant to pull the names back but he forgot to do it in time. The deadline was midnight and at two my phone started to ring. The first call was from Ken Ulliyot saying, “You gonna come play for me?”

Gus Braumberger: I was in Spokane but there was a legal dispute. Bryan Whittal, Larry McLaren and I were all in the same boat. I finally decided to go to Kamloops but Larry asked me to wait. He had played for Ken in Prince Albert. He phoned and Ken said for all three of us to come. It was a three day drive from Spokane to Troy, Ohio, where the training camp was. There were thirty-five or so players, it was a tough training camp. Ken placed a lot of them on other teams.

Gerry Randall: I was playing college hockey in Kirkland Lake, and my coach asked if I'd like to go. I said yes. Two weeks later, there was a phone call at the house from Ken Ulliyot and I took off for training camp. When I got to camp I recognized Ted Wright, too.

Ray Brownlee: I was released after my two-year contract with Boston. I had been in Columbus. I knew Bob Fitchner from junior, he told Marc Boileau about me and I came here on a three-game tryout.

Chuck Adamson: Bobby Rivard and I were playing in Indianapolis. The team folded and we were picked up by Ken Ulliyot. We had played together in Peterborough, too.

Stubby Dubchak: I used to chum around with Moe Bartoli after the games when I was playing in Minneapolis. I skated with the Komets one day with my left ankle in a cast. Ken Ulliyot said, "Don't play. Minneapolis is dropping out of the league, and I want you."

Eddie Long: I was 19 and still playing with St Pat's in Ottawa. Alex Wood talked to me and my dad. He told my parents, "I'll take care of him," and he did. He came all the way from Toledo to see us.

Bob McNeil: I showed up at the Komets' training camp in Stratford with Ricky Albert. He didn't stay.

Rob Laird: After breaking my wrist, I didn't hear anything for a long time. Then one day I got a call from the Komets saying the Penguins had assigned me to Fort Wayne. I'd never heard of the place.

Pete Wywrot: I was a free agent, so I called Fort Wayne and offered my services. I knew Pat Wilson and Joe Kastelic already.

Moe Bartoli: Ken Ulliyot called me. I was scouting for St Louis, Scotty Bowman. I said might as well try. By then, helmets were mandatory. I couldn't get used to it.

Bob McCusker: I had just graduated from college. I was playing golf in Alberta and Ken Ulliyot was there. I won and we talked. Ken made me an offer. I was intending to go to the Seattle Totems training camp, and I got an offer from Winnipeg. I turned them down and accepted the Komets. I liked Fort Wayne and Ulliyot.

Most of the players did not know where Fort Wayne was. "The only thing I knew about Indiana," said Dave Norris, "Was the song, 'Indiana Wants Me.'" (Which it did.)

"Indiana, where's that?" asked Lionel Repka.

Some players did not need to ask. They knew where they were going: Texas. "Ron Ulliyot called me from Fort Worth, so I thought I was going somewhere southern and warm," said Doug Rigler. Ron

Leef, Kotsy and Terry Pembroke also thought of Fort Worth. Joe Kastelic drove down from Windsor-Detroit with Jim Wilson. After they arrived two or three hours later, Joe wondered how they reached Texas so quickly.

The early players stayed at the Van Orman Hotel. Later they were put up at the Gerber House, which was near the Coliseum. One player, who arrived directly from an NHL training camp with its first-class accommodations, found sharing a room with an uncommunicative colleague at the Gerber House disappointing.

Since most of the players were Canadians, they needed a visa to work here. Ray Perry helped with that. "It was easier to get in those days," says Norm Waslawski. The arrangement was that the necessary paperwork would be sent to the player's port of entry. If there was trouble, the team would call into the INS office the next time they had to cross into Windsor or Chatham for a game. When Dave Richardson arrived, there were no papers. He spent the night at the border, then hurried on when everything was fixed in the morning. He arrived in time to play that night.

When George Stanutz arrived in the summer of 1954, he was unsure that he would stay. He was invited to Ernie Berg's house for dinner. In the aftermath of a storm, there were trees down all over. "Why would anyone want to live here?" he asked himself, and saw the Coliseum, standing alone just past the edge of town.

Fortunately for the team, he was taken to Hughie Johnston's bar, where he was given a beer and Hughie set about selling him on Fort Wayne. He decided to try it.

Difficult Early Years

Throughout the fifties, the teams had only thirteen players. If someone was injured or out for any reason, they had to bring someone in; there was nobody waiting in the stands. This meant that players spent more time on the ice than they did in later years. Asked when they could get a rest, Alex Wood replied, "If you need a rest, play defense." Wharton remembered, "His advice to us was 'get on the ice, stay out of the penalty box and when you get tired, come off.'"

Another of Wood's sayings concerned the need to keep moving on the ice: "If you're in the right place at the right time, you can put the puck in the net with a broomstick."

Although people said that Alex was easygoing as a coach, George Drysdale had occasion to see the other side of him. He was two minutes late for practice, and Wood fined him \$25 and made him stay alone on the ice for ten minutes. "It seemed like ten hours," says George. "It was really awful being alone on the ice."

The fact that several of the players (Long, Blondin, O'Brien, Watson) all came from Ottawa gave the team something of a hometown reunion feel in the first year. This was helped along by the fact that Puggy O'Brien and Edgar Blondin were married to sisters of Billy Watson.

Jack Timmins was interested in a job as player-coach. When Wood was replaced by Timmins the next year, there were rumors that he had gone behind Wood's back, carrying tales to Van Orman and Berg.

Timmins was a good center ice man who had previously played in Toledo and Chatham, Ontario. In the first Komets season, he scored 16 goals and 33 assists, ranking fourth in the K's scoring. George Drysdale described him as "the set up man for his wing, a good puck carrier." He had a long association with Alex Wood and his coaching resembled Wood's, although he worked the players harder.

In Eddie Long's memory, Timmins "played too many favorites. Everybody should be treated the same, the way Ken did. I can't recall anything Timmins showed me, Alex showed me things." Drysdale confirmed that everyone wished that Alex had stayed. It was clear that Timmins was not a success as a coach, and he was replaced by Pat Wilson midseason. He left to play for the Clinton (NY) Comets.

Ivan Walmsley spent two seasons here 1953-55 as goaltender. George Drysdale laughs, "He was a dirty goaltender. Don't stand in front of his net too long or he'd lop your ankles off." George Stanutz characterized him as 'inconsistent,' with a tendency to blame the other players if a goal was scored against him. "A good goalie needs a good team in front of him," said Stanutz, "Look at Chuck Adamson." Len Wharton said the calibre of team in front of Ivan didn't do him justice; "He was a natural, talented goaltender. We used to say he could kick them out with the cheeks of his ass."

Ernie Berg was the man managing the team; Harold Van Orman had his other businesses to care for. Berg's background in promotions stood the K's in good stead, as they reached the point where they could draw six or seven thousand fans on Saturday night.

At the end of the 1955-56 season, Grand Rapids folded. Berg co-owned a second team in Huntington, W.Va. He bought up the Grand Rapids team's equipment for use in Huntington. Huntington had one season in the IHL, 1956-57, with a 26-30-4 record. There were four future Komets on the team: Len Ronson, Len Thornson, Moose Lallo and Eddie Olson. The equipment was so bad that one wet day, Thornson skated right out of his skates—the bottom fell off during a game!

Pat Wilson arrived as coach for the last eighteen games of the 1953-54 season. After success coaching in Stratford, Ontario, Wilson was setting up a new team in Niagara Falls in the summer of 1953. However, he was hit by a cement mixer, breaking his leg. He spent a month in the hospital and then was at home convalescing when Jim Handy of the Cleveland Barons telephoned.

Handy told him the Komets needed a player-coach. "Can you play?" Wilson replied that he was out skating every day. He talked to Berg and then went to Fort Wayne quietly to see a game. Berg asked him to take over midseason. He says, "To my happy surprise at the first game in Grand Rapids, we won. Everyone was elated."

He then confides, "If they only knew how that old goat of a coach felt. I was washed out." In fact, someone had shouted from the stands, "Hey Berg, what cemetery did you resurrect that old goat from?" Wilson enjoys telling this story on himself. He says he was feeling better by the fourth game.

In the summer of 1954, between seasons, Wilson had knee surgery at home. When the time for training camp came, he was not ready and had a bad start to the new season. "My position as player-coach was difficult because of my leg," he says. Joe Kastelic confirms the difficulties with Wilson's leg. "I played defense with him and he shouldn't have been playing. Someone would go round him and Pat would look at me, but I couldn't get there in time."

The 1954-55 season provides a view of what could go wrong. It started with high hopes, when Bob Renner described the team as "Pat Wilson's men." The Komets even defeated the powerhouse Cincinnati Mohawks at their first meeting of the year, only the third time the K's had done so. The Mohawks were champions five years in a row.

The K's most hustling forward unit was the Kid Line, with Ross Turnbull, Eddie Long and Bob McNeil. The youngsters were showing the rest what to do. Turnbull departed and was replaced by Hartley McLeod in January 1955.

A twelve-game losing streak in November-December 1954 led to even more player departures, but the results were uneven. The streak ended on 11 December with a win against Cincinnati. It was clear that the Mohawks could no longer depend on an easy victory against Fort Wayne, even when the K's seemed to be down.

The difficulties of the season might be traced to a coach-player feud. The details are a little hazy after all this time, but feelings still run high in those who were there. Wilson refers to the time as 'a mutiny' and places some of the blame on trainer Charlie Ryan.

The players blamed Wilson, citing high-handed tactics. They charge him with treating them unfairly and being devious. Bob Chase said, "He couldn't seem to get the players' ears."

Stanutz' assessment was, "Pat Wilson was a tough, give-it-all guy when he played. He lacked the ability to translate that to the players. If you didn't play like him, you were no good. It's tough to play and coach, too. There was discipline lacking, it was true in all those early teams. The mistake you make is in not going out and building a base for the hockey team. It's no good if you're always taking whoever is available."

Bob McNeil, who was one of Wilson's choices for the team, didn't mind his style. "Pat was harder on the guys than Jack had been." It was a style of coaching he appreciated. "If the man drove me, I'd love him. That's what you're paid for."

The result was a line between the new men and the old. "The new guys didn't care so much what Wilson was doing," said Stanutz.

The incidents escalated. After a losing game in Johnstown, Drysdale told Wilson it was his fault. "He went ballistic," remembered George. He also said, "We would take runs at him in practice. Even little Artie Stone had a run at him. Really beat him one time."

Paul Saindon, star of the Charlottetown Islanders of the MMHL, was brought in. "Wilson put so much pressure on him, it didn't work out. He was traded." Saindon lasted eighteen games.

Management called the players to individual meetings to try to work things out, but they were demoralized by the loss of leading players such as Art Stone, Billy Watson and Edgar Blondin, who had requested his release so he could return to playing in England. Ray Marshall's quarrel with Wilson resulted in his announcing the end of his eleven-year career. Wilson placed him on the suspended list. Attendance at games was falling.

In addition to the personality troubles, the Komets were plagued with injuries. The long dry spell in November coincided with George Stanutz's absence with a broken ankle. He returned around the time that things picked up in December, but he injured his shoulder in late February and was gone for the season.

Bill Richardson's late start did not prevent him from scoring ten goals in 13 games in the fall, and by January he was the top goal-scorer on the team. "What I had going for me," he said, "I was a fast skater and had a good wrist shot. I considered myself a defensive forward." Torn cartilage in his knee resulted in surgery which put him out of action for the rest of the season. He was replaced by Glen (Baldy) Smith.

George Drysdale's heart attack ended his career in early February. Stanutz' replacement was George Edwards, who was brought in for five games from the Chatham Maroons. It was a good choice, because Edwards managed a hat trick in his second game for the K's.

Those breaks came too seldom to make a difference. The team finished bottom of the league and out of the playoffs with a record of 22-37-1. The final heartbreak was the death of trainer Charles Ryan in a car crash as the season was ending.

According to both Chase and Wilson, at least some of the difficulties lay with Berg and Van Orman, whose lack of hockey management experience was a problem. In the end, they fired Wilson. He learned of his firing in the newspaper.

There were differences both in the way things were organized and in the mode of play in those days. For instance, a score of twenty or twenty-five goals was considered big. What changed? George Polinuk says, "The defense got better. When the defensemen opened up, they could feed the centermen. A really good centerman, like Reg Primeau, made the difference." "Orr changed it," says Stanutz. "When we played defense, it was to the blue line only. The coach would get mad if you went to the other end. You could contribute very little except in your own end." George Drysdale said the defenseman's job was to 'clear the puck out of the zone.'

As noted, players also spent more time on the ice. "We played 42 minutes a game," says Eddie Long. "Our regular shifts, power plays. It's not like that now."

One thing that has not changed is the three-man line. "The third guy back checks. I did that," remembered Bill Richardson. "Most of the hits in those days were clean," insists Drysdale, "People had more

respect for you. Also there was no slapshot to hit you." On the other hand, Bob McNeil says, "It was survival of the fittest in that league. If they scared you once you never had a chance."

Coaching was different, too. "You didn't learn from the coaches. Today you would," remembers Bob McNeil, "Now you can see the teams practicing, they have 100 pucks. We had one puck. Each guy had one shot. We'd skate around a few times and we were warmed up. We'd try a few line rushes, a scrimmage. Another difference was, if you gave the puck away, you sat on the bench. I hated getting pulled off the ice."

The new player-coach in 1955-56 was Doug McCaig. His career had begun in 1939 and included seasons with the Detroit Red Wings. For the previous three seasons he had been player-coach in Toledo. He was a big man, remembered as six foot two and 230 pounds. The official record says six foot and 175 pounds, but the difference may be found in Bob Chase's memory of a game when the Komets beat Cincinnati in Cincinnati. "Doug McCaig was so intimidating to the Mohawks, we won. He was mad because someone had crosschecked a Komet." Doug's best friend was Hartley McLeod. "Doug was rough and mean looking because he was so big," Hartley acknowledges, "All you had to do was hit him and you'd find out."

McCaig once hit Eddie Long so hard, his gloves and stick hit the scoreboard. "Eddie had his head down," explained Hartley, "He skated low anyway." George Stanutz said that Doug's idea of fun was to arm-wrestle in a bar and when McCaig was on the opposing team, "You didn't want to go into a corner with him. You wouldn't come out." He was still a great guy, respected by the players. He had a reputation too; young Tom McVie was playing his first pro games in Toledo, and he says when he saw McCaig behind the bench, "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. I thought I'd really made it now," playing in the same league with Doug McCaig.

The Komets were no longer bottom of the league, and had seven players with more than fifty points. Wywrot had 90.

They developed some new moves. Pete Wywrot would flip the puck up in the air, between the defensemen. Joe Kastelic would be behind, could catch the puck on his stick as it came down and score. "They scored lots of goals that way," says George Polinuk, "Pete could really handle the puck."

The fans started to turn out again, too. "We were new and we could outdraw the Pistons," boasted Kastelic. Previously, Bill

Richardson had been talking to people at a local golf club and they said that hockey's rules were too hard to understand. They preferred basketball. The 1956 Olympics seemed to ignite an interest in hockey, despite the fact that the USSR won the gold medal.

The 1956-57 season was a disappointment. Doug McCaig broke his leg, which ended his hockey career. McCaig and Nels Podolsky, the player-coach of the Troy Bruins, got in a skirmish behind the net in Troy, "more wrestling than fighting," according to George Stanutz. Doug came after Nels, who ducked. Doug fell backward, Nellie on top of him.

"I knew right away it was bad," said Polinuk, the trainer, "I stayed with him for a couple of days, then we came back in an ambulance." McCaig was five weeks in St. Joe's Hospital and came to the games on a gurney.

Doug and captain Hartley McLeod had played together in Edmonton, and he appointed Hartley to take over coaching duties. "We carried on without much adjustment," said Bill Richardson.

The stats speak for themselves. Only two Komets that season had more than fifty points; even Joe Kastelic had a bad year. The six-team league was dominated by Cincinnati, who was more than forty points ahead of second-place Indianapolis.

George Stanutz said, "I was so glad that season was over. You just wanted to get out. We made the playoffs. We beat Cincie 2-1 in Cincie, then came here. It was 3-1 in the middle of the second period. We screwed the game away. Jerry Fleury, as good as he was the first game, he was that bad the second. We felt we couldn't depend on any one. One guy can win or lose it for you. I'd been on teams that won all the time—it's no fun to be on a team that loses all the time. I didn't enjoy playing, the fun was gone."

Jerry Fleury was a goalie everyone remembered. "He was hyper, always moving," said Dick Zimmerman, and to George Polinuk he was 'a little flakey at times, on and off the ice.' Zimmerman remembered, "He was a crazy young guy who'd get a shutout or allow ten goals. He was out to have fun." McVie says, "He depended on his reflexes, quick, and a right hand catcher, not many of those around."

He says that Fleury and Bill Short made a good pair. Short had a powerful slapshot, which was new in those days. "He had a good shot from the point, well positioned and well organized, he could handle the puck well," said Richardson. Short and McCaig were a duo on the power play; it was Doug's job to pass the puck for Bill's great slapshot.

George Stanutz had known Pat Wilson in Ontario and was brought here for the start of the 1955-56 season. He brought his sturdy, stay-at-home defense skills when the team needed them, and also his high spirits. "He was a ra-ra guy who could get the guys fired up. He was good for team morale," said Polinuk.

"As a puck carrier, he seemed to have it on a string," remembered Drysdale, "He could carry it through the whole team." Long confirms that he moved the puck well and compares his style with a later Komet defense star, Jim Burton, 'but not as fast.' He was also tough. During a fight with Bob Turner in Grand Rapids, he broke his ankle in the second period, but he still played the third.

Stanutz' Fort Wayne career had an inauspicious start. "In those days," he said, "Between the Komet dressing room and the ice there was a rubber mat, and we wore rubber skate guards to walk on it. I forgot to take mine off and I fell on my ass as soon as I stepped on the ice. It was a great start to the season." Things improved after the game, when George had a telegram advising him that his son had been born earlier that day.

He had a cut groin during a game in Huntington. "You did a lot of trying to hold on till you got home in those days," said George. The wound kept oozing and he passed out in the car. He spent time in an Ohio hospital before finally returning to Fort Wayne.

Edgar Blondin had not returned to England after all, and once Wilson was no longer on the scene, he came back to the Komets for the last three years of his hockey career. He was wiry, muscular and small, only 145 pounds according to some, and a headlong dasher. "He could wind up, go like hell and end up behind the net," says Polinuk. He was also tough, a former boxer who could 'hit you ten times before you got your gloves off' and would 'go at anybody.' He was the protector on a line with Long and Stone.

Bob Chase tells a wonderful tale. "Blondin said to Art Stone, 'I'd like a pass once in a while,' so Artie sent him one four or five times. At the break, Blondin says to him, 'Am I the only guy on the ice? Stop passing to me!'" Polinuk also remembers he had a little whistle that meant he wanted the pass.

In comparing Blondin and Gus Braumberger, Bud Gallmeier said, "Neither was blessed with a lot of natural talent for hockey. Each balanced that shortcoming with hustle and determination. Blondin's speed was also a big asset."

The Komets held an Edgar Blondin Night in December 1958, after his retirement, when the fan favorite was presented with cash and gifts. He left hockey because those amazing legs had gotten tired. Gallmeier's final verdict was, "Everything Blondin did was spectacular."

When the Huntington Hornets folded, Eddie Olson was free to join the Komets as player-coach for 1957-58. He was an elite player from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and consequently probably qualifies as the first American Komet. He had played on twelve AHL championship teams. He was now winding down from a long career.

George Polinuk says, "He was fair but firm and close to the players. It's different when the coach is on the ice. He didn't care what you did as long as you produced." Len Ronson agreed: "If you did your job, he didn't bother you. He was good with the players, one of the guys, and ran firm practices." Being a player-coach is tough, said Con Madigan, "You can't see what's going on as much as you can from the bench." Eddie and Hartley had a history from their AHL days, so Hartley was traded to Indy early in the season. Things didn't look promising there, so he retired.

The Komets did well that season, coming second in the league, if still 27 points behind the first place Mohawks. The situation on the ice, however, was not the worry.

The team was in danger of folding. Attendance was down and there were money problems. Although good at promotions, Berg was not a competent manager and there were numerous creditors, including the IRS, banging on the door. Harold Van Orman, unsure what to do, asked for advice and then called on Ken Ulliyot, a coach from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, to take over. "He made a bad first impression physically," remembered Bob Chase, "But he had good stats as a player." He would make some impressive stats as a coach in Fort Wayne, too.

The IRS impounded the receipts from the first game of the new season, but Ulliyot, Colin Lister and Perry talked them out of it. After that, it was cash on delivery for supplies until things were straightened out. With Ulliyot and Lister in charge, the situation changed quickly.

Billy Watson

Billy Watson was the first Komet selected to an all-star team. After starting his career in his native Ottawa, he had dazzled Halifax with seasons of 115 and 117 points.

His departure from the Komets early in the 1954-55 season was one of the principal causes of the player-coach feud of that year. "I traded him because he'd become indifferent," said Pat Wilson. His career was affected, although Watson recovered to make his last two pro seasons (1958-60) with the Clinton Comets a reflection of his former glory.

He had an affinity for the puck. "He could just take it," said Eddie Long, and George Stanutz remembered, "Some guys have a sense for the puck. The puck seemed to find him, like Gretzky. He was a better player than the league deserved." Len Wharton described him as, 'a sweet, sweet playmaker.' "He sure could pass," said Joe Kastelic, "He told me to skate when he wanted me to skate. In the old days the centermen controlled the wing men."

Ivan Walmsley said, "Billy had a theory, the closer in you get, the higher up the puck goes." It worked for him.

Billy Watson was the only number 13 with the Komets until Andy Bezeau.

Pete Wywrot

Pete Wywrot had played on teams from Seattle to Nova Scotia, and liked to move around. An intelligent player with good hand-eye coordination and a fine, accurate wrist shot, he was also aggressive and a hard worker. He rarely fought.

He arrived in Fort Wayne on 14 December 1954, as a replacement for Billy Watson and made fifty points in 38 games that season.

Pete was voted the most valuable player of the 1955-56 season, for plays such as this one, described by Bob Reed in the *Journal Gazette*: "Wywrot gave the Komets a 2-1 lead after 8:27 of play in the second period, scoring on probably the outstanding play of the season. After taking a pass from Eddie Long he skated in from the blue line with a lot of deception and faked [goalie Norm] Defelice out of position." Bob Renner also commented on Wywrot's 'artistry,' describing him pushing the puck under Lou Crowdis 'somehow.'

Pete was a great talker on the ice, much of it outspoken 'how'd you miss that one' comments which irritated his teammates and coaches. Not everyone listened, however, as Hartley observed, "He wouldn't yell at me or I'd have popped him one."

His wife Lois also stood out in some minds, because she had a head for hockey statistics. "No guy could trip her up," said Stella Kastelic. "She was ahead of her time. She'd even 'coach' Pat Wilson!"

The Man With the Racehorse Legs

Bob McNeil spent only one season with the Komets—an experience shared with many other players—but he has kept in touch with the team ever since.

After a conventional start in hockey, he returned home to Timmins to play senior hockey and work in the mines. He showed up at the K's training camp and was accepted by Pat Wilson in 1954. Soon he found himself travelling to exhibition games in North Bay, Sudbury and Sault Ste Marie (all Ontario). At the time the team drove in three white station wagons, and rookies McNeil and Ross Turnbull were assigned to Charlie Ryan's. Since Ryan was the trainer, they had all the equipment, so there were only two seats; Bob ended up scrunched in the back with the bags. He suggested to Turnbull perhaps they could take turns in the front seat. Maybe he could get up front from North Bay to Sudbury? No. From Sudbury to the Sault? No. By this time, Bob was angry and he grabbed Ross and pulled him over the seat so he could share the misery. Ryan was impressed and told the other players about the incident. The result was that McNeil was quickly accepted as one of them.

McNeil's most noticeable feature was his speed. His long thin legs gave him speed, and he'd practice breaking fast and skating. "It's important because you can jump on the guy," he explains. He had learned a lot about skating at the arena in Timmins. NHL great Ted Lindsay had come over from Kirkland Lake to skate and Bob would follow the pros and mimic them. When he saw what Bob could do, Pat Wilson described him as the fastest guy he'd seen on a pair of skates. It was also an advantage to the slightly-built McNeil. "I never had to worry about the big guys," he said, "They couldn't catch me anyway."

He could still mix it up if needed. In late November, after scoring two goals against Cincinnati, he had a stick-swinging duel with Bun Smith which resulted in match penalties for both (and six stitches for Smith).

He shone in an interesting game in February 1955 at the Coliseum against Toledo. It was scoreless for two periods, with Roy McMeekin holding off 29 Komet shots in a series of sensational stops. In the third, McNeil scored, followed shortly by Wywrot who sent one over

McMeekin's shoulder. Then McNeil had a breakaway, when he faked McMeekin well out on the ice. Skating quickly around him, he shot into the open net. The final score was 3-0. For an inexplicable reason, Bob Reed mistakenly referred to McNeil as 'frail.'

The K's expected McNeil to return in 1955-56 but the Canadian players were here on an entertainment visa, which left them eligible for the military draft. Both Long and Drysdale were considered unfit for service (perhaps they were also 'frail'), but McNeil faced the army if he crossed the border, so he remained in Canada. It was the Komets' loss.

He later played for several years in England, where he acquired a wife and skills as an electrician. He recently skated a race at age 68 against a man half his age, who was left well behind.

WOWO Broadcasts and the Other Media

From the beginning WOWO was the station which broadcast the Komets games. Ernie Ashley, the sports director, had a limited interest in hockey, but he began broadcasting from rinkside in the first season. The sponsor was Old Crown Brewery. In mid-1953, Bob Chase joined the station as the color man. He also filled in for Ashley when he was at IU broadcasting basketball. In the spring of 1954, Ashley moved to Louisville and Chase has been the voice of the Komets since.

In the early days, the first period was blacked out, presumably to encourage fans to attend the games in person. There was a time when selling the broadcasts was difficult when the team's record was unimpressive. The road broadcasts were cut and home games consisted of the third period only.

In fact, the general manager threatened to take hockey off completely. Chase says the sales staff were not interested in the sport and did not expend the necessary energy to find sponsors. Once he was allowed to start selling time too, things picked up. By 1964, the second and third periods of all home games and all complete away games appeared on the broadcast schedule as WOWO became known as the voice of the IHL. By the 80s, when any suggestion was made to end the hockey broadcasts, it was the loyal sponsors who kept them going.

Gunnar Elliott was part owner of WOWO and a supporter of the Komets from the beginning. His enthusiasm was obvious: "Wherever Gunnar Elliot was, there was sports." There was plenty of advertising money including a beer bus connected to Elliott's other business, AALCO Distributing. His involvement meant that other beers became part of the

Komets ads. Behind the scenes, Elliott also arranged summer employment for the players and helped with immigration difficulties.

When Ashley did interviews, it was mostly Ernie Berg who spoke for the team, although the players contributed sometimes, particularly for question and answer sessions.

When television broadcasting started, people thought it might cut into WOWO's audience, but Chase says, "Television actually enhanced WOWO's broadcasts."

The reason was somewhat backhanded. Fort Wayne's premier sportscaster, Hilliard Gates did some hockey on WKJG, filmed by cameraman Ollie Strong, but usually confined it to the spring, and billed the broadcasts as specials. He later invited Chase to do the hockey broadcasts on television, reserving the Pistons basketball games for himself. After consideration, Chase stuck with radio. The fans had the final word on the hockey broadcasts. Some of them told Chase that they would turn on the hockey, but with the sound off. They watched the screen but listened to Chase's play-by-play on WOWO.

The color man's job is to fill in the blanks and provide highlights of how things happened, while Chase concentrates on the play-by-play. Chase has had a number of color men over the years, including in the first two decades Cal Stewart, Marv Hunter, Frank George, Abe Albright, Don Chevilett, Dugan Fry. Some former Komets also worked with him: Drysdale, Stone, Wright, Madigan, McLeod, Berg, Long.

Some of Chase's best memories are of John Davis. A classics professor at Grace College in Warsaw, Davis was a frustrated sports announcer and a splendid color man. When he accompanied the team on the bus, he could be seen correcting Greek exams as they drove. Chase would refer to him as 'Digger Davis' on the air, and the prof received fan mail in that name.

The radio broadcasts built up a huge fan base in the Fort Wayne region, but WOWO's beam (at 50,000 watts, one of the largest in the country) meant that even faraway hockey fans knew and listened to the Komets. It was an advantage to the players, too. Although they were far from home, their folks could still hear them play. Stubby Dubchak's parents in Kenora, Ontario, heard all the games, as did Roger Maisonneuve's in Goward and Joe Kastelic's in Kirkland Lake. Even Dave Richardson's dad in Winnipeg could just manage to hear, once he discovered that if he sat in his car in a certain lane, the radio would pick it up. Fans in Florida and New England also heard.

Ab Cava, Rory's dad, would listen up in Thunder Bay 'if the stars are aligned right,' and would call Brant Kiessig's parents when Muskegon came to Fort Wayne and both boys would be playing on the same ice, so they could hear about their son, too.

Marge Graham enjoys remembering a game about 1966-67, when her brother Jim Ryan had season tickets in section 32, right behind the goal and beside the opening where the Zamboni entered to clean the ice. Jim and Marge's husband Don were at the game.

A shot on goal was deflected and flew into the stands, landing on the other side of the divider from Jim and Don. Jim reached for it, but it was too far and he was in danger of falling. Don then held Jim by the legs so he could grasp the prize.

All the while, Bob Chase continued describing the scene on the radio, and Marge, listening at home, knew just who the two men were.

As for those faraway fans, let Randy Dannenfelser speak for them all. Randy was a young teenager in Great Neck, New York who was hockey crazy in 1962. As well as playing, he listened to the Komets and idolized Lionel Repka. He writes about the broadcasts, "When I explain the difference between Canadian and American hockey announcing styles to the uninitiated, I usually compare Bob Chase with Foster Hewitt and Danny Gallivan. Chase painted a word picture of precisely what was happening in the game as it happened, as opposed to Hewitt and Gallivan, who gave impressions much of the time. The Canadians would frequently stray from the action when little of major significance was taking place on the ice (board play in the neutral zone, defensemen chasing down pucks during line changes, etc.); The Voice of the K's didn't seem to think that anything on the ice was insignificant while the scoreboard clock was ticking. He always made sure to let us know what was going on down there, just as it was happening."

Bob Chase grew up in Marquette, Michigan where he played hockey, basketball and football. He started broadcasting while in college, never dreaming that it would be a career.

A chance visitor from Fort Wayne heard Chase on the air and alerted Gus Harris, the manager of WOWO. Harris phoned Chase and invited him to send a demo tape, which he didn't get around to doing. Harris called again, while Chase was on the air, with the demand, "Where the hell is that tape?" A week later, Chase had an audition and an urgent invitation to come to Fort Wayne. He arrived in July 1953.

One reason he got the job was that Harris thought Chase sounded like Hilliard Gates. "Everybody has a style and you stick to your style," Bob says modestly. In the early days he had to learn, and his dad was a good critic. "Mention the score more," he'd say and Bob laughs that you'd get so engrossed in the game you'd forget to pop it in.

As he became known for the quality of his play-by-play, Chase had offers to move up to the NHL from St. Louis, Detroit and Washington, but he turned them down. "They didn't offer any security," he said, "And anyway, I like Fort Wayne." His national stature was confirmed on a casual visit he paid to CNN in Atlanta. Fred Hickman, senior anchor there, was glad to meet an admired colleague and legend.

From time to time Chase was faced with difficulties. At the time when they brought in the helmet law, he remembers a game in Dayton when the players warmed up without the helmets, then came on for the game wearing them. Chase didn't know anyone! He later got to know the players by number, but in that game was kept busy writing them down during the commercials.

Describing the fights also took some finesse. "I didn't want to sensationalize it, but at the same time I had to be graphic," he says. "If a Komet was being beaten I wouldn't make that clear."

Players from other teams might take exception to Chase's interpretation of events. Gordie Lane had briefly been a Komet in 1973-74, but Marc Boileau traded him to Dayton. Lane, 'a tough sucker,' left angry. The following season in Dayton, Lane checked Doug Gibson, who then gave him eight quick ones. Lane was on his knees and Chase's commented, "Gibson totally trimmed him." Lane angrily told Chase, "As long as you're broadcasting, the Komets won't lose their fights."

Most Fort Wayne fans and players would echo Lois Wywrot's assessment about Chase: "He was so fair and sensible, not saying a lot of dumb things, and he was nice to the players too," although former Komet trainer John Bloom considered him 'too damn radical, telling the players what to do and criticizing them.' Rob Laird's short comment was, "He's an amazing man."

One fan said, "Chase can make it exciting even when it isn't. It's never the same game as when you were there in the rink, he upgrades it." Asked about this, Chase said, "I've never falsified the game, but I also didn't want it to be dull." The same fan also said, "I'd be in Florida sitting in the car. I could bring in 1190, Chase and the Komets—you hit the dial and you know exactly who he is."

Fort Wayne has been lucky in its newspapers, too. Gus Braumberger said, "The quality of coverage here was better, bigger than in Omaha or Indy." In the fifties, the *News-Sentinel* had Bob Renner and the *Journal Gazette* Bob Reed.

Reed never wrote anything negative about the players. "He was kind to the guys," says Chase. "He knew the sacrifices they made." Reed later taught Bud Gallmeier his methods. George Stanutz said that he would often walk over to Reed's office to drink coffee and talk. "There was a closeness, we all stuck together."

One weakness of the Fort Wayne papers in the fifties—perhaps it was more general in journalism—was that the players' names were constantly misspelled, sometimes showing up in two or three forms in the same article. In one piece by Bob Renner, he credits 'McLean' with a goal and the reader is mystified, unsure whether he means McNeil or McLeod. The players found it irritating but laugh about it now.

Later the coverage changed to Bud Gallmeier at the *News-Sentinel* and Carl Wiegman on the *Journal Gazette*. They were also close to the team. "They were around us all the time," said Ted Wright, "There would be articles about us, our families, other activities. They were made honorary old timers, part of the family."

One feature of the *News-Sentinel* coverage was the high quality of action photographs. In the mid-sixties, many fine examples of these were by Argie Shock.

To his accounts of the games, Gallmeier added a notes and comment column called "Icing the Puck." It contains more meat about the players and what was happening inside the Komets than the more straightforward descriptions of games.

Eddie Long described his method: "If you had a good game, he'd write it up. If you had a bad game, he'd write it up, but not as beautifully as the good game." George Drysdale added, "Both Renner and Reed were good guys. Reed never knocked you, he'd say nothing first. Gallmeier was a fair writer, but he could be critical. You can't sugar coat all the time. We knew if we'd played well or not. Some nights, the harder you played, the worse you'd get."

Gallmeier covered the Komets for thirty-five years and is remembered with great respect by all the players who knew him. "He was a good writer, a staunch Komet supporter who promoted the team all the time," said Rob Laird, "I was never misquoted by Bud Gallmeier." Blake Sebring says that Bud never used a notebook. He

goes on, "Terry Pembroke said to me that something I'd written was just like Bud would have written it. That was a great compliment." Bud wrote the IHL material in *The Hockey News*. Blake added, "I don't think you'll ever be able to measure what Bud and Bob did for the Komets and the IHL."

Although Ken Ullyot says that he was often misquoted in the paper, Colin Chin says that he only once had to confront a reporter, for printing an off-the-record comment. The reporter apologized and off the record stayed off from then on.

By the 80s, the *Journal Gazette's* coverage had lessened somewhat, while the *News-Sentinel* continued the tradition which is still maintained by Blake Sebring today. "The *Journal Gazette* was constantly changing writers and the ones they had were always looking for an angle," said Laird. Local sports had a tougher time in the 90s competing with a broad spectrum of national events for newspaper space. Still, as Sebring says, "They get good media coverage. No other minor league team gets the coverage they do."

Mr. Komet

Eddie Long played on the first Komets team in 1952, and in 2002 remains a strong presence in the hockey community of Fort Wayne.

He was the youngest player on that first team. He grew up next to a hockey rink in Ottawa, Ontario. He played his junior hockey there and joined the Komets at 19. Aside from a few games in the Ontario senior league after his retirement, he spent his whole pro career here.

Eddie's own assessment of Eddie is that 'work made the difference, I wasn't the most talented, but you can learn talent.' This echoes his colleagues, who say that he overcame whatever was lacking by 'incredible effort' (Chase), 'tireless, true grit' (Primeau), 'playing from the heart' (Braumberger), 'determination' (Thornson), 'over-achieving' (Randall). He was always moving, up and down the ice like crazy.

Here's a goal in February 1963: Adamson made a save and cleared the puck. Long took it and 'snaked his way through the whole shebang' to score. Adamson got the assist. Another Long shot two weeks later "sent the puck at [Dennis Jordan] so hard that he was almost carried into the cage by the impact."

Ken Ullyot summed up saying, "He was a hard worker. If it did not work the first time, he'd make it the second time. Also, he had a

heavy shot." Where did this come from? "It was hard to say, but you couldn't learn it, you just had it."

He was one of the best goalscorers of his era, a judgement confirmed by Glenn Ramsay, who was often on the receiving end of those shots. Asked what Komet gave him trouble in the mid-fifties, he said, "The perennial Eddie Long. Eddie could score. His shot wasn't as hard as some, but he always got the puck and he shot every opportunity he had." Len Thomson said, "If Eddie was near the net, it always went in. Off his stick, off his head, it didn't matter." Long himself said, "There was always a goaltender you could beat. It was psychological."

One famous season (1962-63), Eddie had 48 goals in 48 games. "It got to be February and I was so tired. You can't maintain that pace. And when you've got the goals, they're going to be gearing for you every game. It was too much."

He remained a star and a fan favorite throughout his career (1952-66), but the middle years, 1959-63, were the high point. He topped 100 points in 1962-63, at twenty-nine, when other players might be considering retirement. "You reach your potential and you blossom," he says. He had three hat tricks in the 1959-60 season.

He was always on good terms with Ullyot and was surprised one practice to find the coach coming down hard on him. Afterward, he asked why, and Ullyot replied, "You were the only one working out there, Eddie. If I got to you, I'd get to everybody."

Although he now advises against fighting, he was able to defend himself when needed, to the point where the Komet program in 1954-55 said of him, "He packs a lot of aggressiveness and it seems that he is always the unfortunate one who is around when one of those fights break out on the ice."

Gus Braumberger remembers a game when a Toledo player hit Eddie in the head. He was sufficiently shaken up they had to take him to Parkview Hospital and it was announced he was 'gone for the game.' While they were waiting for the ambulance to arrive, a referee broke his leg. He was put in the first ambulance and they phoned for another for Eddie. In the third period, there was Eddie with a bandage round his head, back on the ice and ready to play. The crowd went wild. Chase suggested that one element of his force and achievement was that he knew his father was listening on the radio. Dr. Priddy's comment was, "He'd play if he could get one skate on the ice."

For two seasons, Long acted as coach of the Komets, while continuing to play in some games. He was listed as 'assistant coach' but observers say he did most of the coaching, and when Ken Ulliyot accompanied the U.S. national team to Europe, Eddie was clearly in charge back here. He proudly says, "While Ken was gone, the team went from last to first."

As others found later, the transition from player to coach could be difficult, and not everyone thought that Long was in his element coaching. He was very vocal, said John Goodwin, "He told Bobby and Merv they weren't doing well and that if it weren't for Jumbo they'd be on the bench." Asked about this blunt way of speaking, Eddie said, "It's not what you say, it's how you say it." Discipline was important to him. "Coaching is 28 hours a day, eight days a week, that's why I left."

Eddie summed up his hockey playing credo as 'improvise, be patient and stay on your wing.' The Komets gave him an Eddie Long Appreciation Night on 29 March 1965. Among the presentations was one from longtime rivals the Port Huron Flags. The crowd was one of the largest in the history of the club and the team obliged with a 12-1 romp over the Dayton Gems. Bud Gallmeier wrote at the time, "Eddie Long is more than just a statistic, he's a spirit, the spirit of competition."

The Lamplighter

Someone said that Joe Kastelic scored more junk goals than anyone in the league. They meant he seemed to be there to catch rebounds or when the goalie was looking the other way. Maybe it was true.

Joe says, "I scored goals and everybody says, 'What did he do?' The puck came off my stick and went in. There were reasons. You have to look ahead of time. If you can't see a spot in the net, then hit the goalie's pads. The puck will bounce off and then you'll get a second chance. Also, if he's out of the net a little, he can't see the blank spots. When he's in the net, put it right here [gesturing to between the pads and skates]." What seemed like junk goals were actually planned.

Growing up in Kirkland Lake, Kastelic was a natural athlete with many talents. He shone in track and baseball as well as hockey. Chase says that he could have played for the Boston Red Sox, but Joe chose hockey. "All I wanted was a job."

He had harmed his ankle doing track, which meant he would not move up. Dr. Stuckey devised a shoe with a plate and a brace, similar in

effect to a polio brace. This meant he was not fast. Other players guessed that both Wilson and Ulliot thought Joe was dogging it when it fact it was just difficult skating with the brace. One said, "He did what he had to do. There are guys paid to backcheck, there are guys paid to score."

Another difficulty was that he had sight problems. When the league-leading Cincinnati Mohawks offered three players for him, Ernie Berg turned them down. Joe took the opportunity to ask for contact lenses, which were an innovation. They were huge, nothing like today's tiny discs, and he had to take them out between periods to rest his eyes. Of course, the other guys called him 'Magoo,' and Bill Richardson commented, "He played pretty good for a guy who couldn't see."

Pat Wilson dropped him, 'one of Wilson's mistakes,' according to George Stanutz. No one picked him up and when Wilson was fired, Berg invited him back. In 1957 he was traded to Troy for (as he says) 'two old players, a dirty jockstrap and a broken stick.' He was there only briefly, then went to Louisville for three seasons. When Louisville folded, Ulliot brought him back to the Komets.

It didn't work out. He was traded to Muskegon after one season, but the reasons are unclear. It was not because of the stats: he had 89 in his last season in Louisville and 88 in Fort Wayne. George Stanutz said his playing had an easygoing quality which may have been deceptive. "He gave the impression that the puck was going faster when he didn't have it than when he did have it." Bobby Rivard says, "Joe was an offensive not a defensive player, that's a reason they got rid of him." Dr. Priddy suggested that Ken Ulliot asked if the shoe brace would hold him back and the doctors said yes, so Joe was traded. "He proved us wrong," the doctor says now.

It was a good move for Joe. In Muskegon, everything fell into place and he was on the road to setting a scoring record. "The team in Muskegon was built around Joe," said Dubchak. The record he set lasted for 26 years, until broken by another Komet, Scott Gruhl.

He had become the Lamplighter, the man who turned on the red light behind the goal. "I liked to see the red on the nets," says Joe with a grin. "In Muskegon, Warren Back gave me the puck and it opened my game up. They controlled me in Muskegon, they gave me the puck."

He was always in the right place at the right time, according to Gus Braumberger, and when he was, says Chuck Adamson, he was the toughest to stop. Con Madigan remembers playing against him, "I wondered, who is this guy? He was always in the danger zone, you had

to be beside him all the time. Otherwise he was around the net, he'd get the puck, move back and bang."

His long stride might have been one reason for the seeming ease of movement on the ice. Dick Zimmerman said, "He had the longest stride in hockey, one foot on the blue line and the other nine feet in. He scored the longest goal. Hal Jackson, the ref, saw the puck but the goalie couldn't. It was Jacques Marcotte. The puck went higher in the air and landed behind him and went in. Marcotte threw his stick into the stands, it landed in section 26 seat A-14." Flossie Zimmerman, who sold the K's season tickets for years, chimed in, "That would have been Elmer Miller."

Joe was inducted into the Muskegon Sports Hall of Fame in 2001. His hockey career could be summed up in a phrase written by Bob Renner on 15 January 1955: "Joe Kastelic roared in from the right to sock in a rebound."

A New Regime

The beginning of the 1958-59 season saw the Komets in disarray, but with light on the horizon. The team was in difficult financial straits, but the new coach and general manager began to make changes.

Five players remained from the previous year (Ronson, Thomson, Long, Gould, Stone). Ken Ullyot brought in a number of players he knew from his years coaching in western Canada. He also asked Colin Lister, a banker he had known in Prince Albert, to join him to manage the financial side of the Komets.

The creditors saw that Ullyot was honest and were willing to work with him. "Main Auto," a principal supplier of equipment, "was very helpful," says Dick Zimmerman. Lister worked hard, and was able to pay off the creditors by the second year. Selling tickets was the best way to bring funds in, so he also spent four nights a week talking to local groups. "I was good at it," Lister says. "And we sold tickets." He credits Ullyot with making the difference by putting an exciting team on the ice, however, saying "It was tougher to build up a team that's been down than to start one from nothing."

Ken Ullyot was born in Saskatoon, and spent seven seasons (1946-53) as a centerman with the New Westminster Royals. In 1947-48 he had 38 goals and 71 assists. He had been coaching junior in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, for several years when the call came from Fort Wayne. He credits Alex Shibicky, a former New York Ranger and his

coach in New Westminster, for teaching him a lot of the exercises he used here. "My coaches taught me, give the puck away a lot, carry it with your head up. If you can't pass the puck or carry it, how can you do anything?" He also operated on the theory that if you heard someone explain something, that was good, but if you heard someone explain something and then you did it, that was better. "It made me smile when I saw them not making the same mistake again," he says.

He had coached Reggie Primeau for three years in Prince Albert. He was strict, "and sarcastic with the young guys. I didn't want to play with him again," said Reggie.

Reggie's girlfriend lived at Birch Hills, forty minutes from Prince Albert, and he went to visit her, although team rules said that players weren't supposed to leave town. He was fined ten dollars by Ullyot and replied, "That's fine."

Ullyot responded, "Okay, then you'll be fined \$20."

"That's the last time I ever said anything back to him," says Reggie. He also points out that when the Prince Albert players reached the NHL training camps, "We could do the drills as good as the Rangers because we did them so often."

Ullyot's great strength as a coach was his ability to teach the fundamentals of hockey to the players. He knew them, he could teach them, and if needed, he could develop new ones to correct specific difficulties a player had.

Jack Loser described him as, "One of the most knowledgeable coaches I've ever seen. His drills were text book. I once saw him have them play using the stick butt end up. They had to control the puck with the little end."

Lionel Repka said, "Ken was good at basics, that's where it starts and ends." Len Thomson said, "Ken was good at systems, how to get out of your own end, playing position hockey, moving without the puck. He emphasized that working together is important."

"He used to run some stiff practices," said Norm Waslawski, "There were drills, you went over and over them till you did it right. The old school way." John Goodwin credits the hard practices for keeping the players in good shape. Eddie Long says, "Every Monday morning, win or lose, we had the same practice."

"He knew how to tell you to do things," explained Bobby Rivard, "Other coaches would say what you did wrong, he showed you what to do right in practice. When you're playing in the NHL you should

know what to do. Up there, the coach is for putting the right people on the ice at the right time. At this level, you're learning. You know when you made a mistake and you want to fix it."

Naturally, the players compared his coaching to others they had known, and Ulliyot always fares well, names like Doug and Max Bentley and Fred Shero. "He was every bit as knowledgeable as Scotty Bowman," remembered Gerry Randall.

He continued, "He got your attention, kept it during practices. If we were on a losing streak, he'd be friendly, but if we were on a winning streak, he was on our tail. That was to keep you from getting cocky." Colin Lister confirms this: "He could be a bear. If you were on a five game winning streak, look out when he came in in the morning."

Randall remembers some specific drill techniques:

"He would skate the hell out of you, to the blue line, the red line, the other blue line. He was so organized, I learned a lot. He was great in the dressing room too, walking around looking grim to get us to focus."

"He made us form a circle at center ice. He'd space us out, then we had to get a puck in and out around the men, without looking at the puck."

"Once when I was having a rough time, he got a rope, made a semi-circle and then stood in different places to show me how to cover the angles. I was playing too deep."

"Once he asked us, 'Do you know you have seven players on the ice all the time?' The players were confused, what did he mean? Only Reggie knew, because he'd played with him before. The answer was 'the boards.'"

Len Thomson's interesting example was, "You have to teach the puck to skip."

His style was that of an old-fashioned coach: strict, fair, a disciplinarian, with a certain distance between himself and the players. Despite that distance, his kindly side showed itself when it was needed. "He was good to me, talked to me about playing," said Dave Richardson. "In mid-season, the Canucks wanted me, so I asked Ken's advice. He said, 'You can play either place with my blessing,' so I stayed. The discussion was more kindly than it could have been. I was happy here."

The distance might seem like harshness at times. Adamson said, "He was a motivator. You'd get the silent treatment and you'd know something was up. Once I was reading on the bus, and Ken got mad. He said, 'If I ever see you reading on the bus again, I'll trade you.'"

Almost everyone talks about Ken the psychologist, who was good at handling people, sometimes before they even knew they'd been handled. Jack Loser remembers a game when Merv Dubchak was hurt. The doctors were sewing him up, Ken came in and Merv said, "I'm done." Ken replied, "That's okay, but I wouldn't let that SOB know I was out of the game." Merv tore back to the ice.

On more than one occasion, when a player missed the bus and kept everyone waiting, Ken would ask solicitously if they needed to stop for breakfast. Gerry Sillers was one of them.

"I missed the bus, and was brought by Colin Lister in his car. We caught up to them. It was a five day road trip, and I had no shirt, no luggage, no jacket. Terry Pembroke had tried to cover for me and said I was in class at Purdue. I got to the back of the bus with my head down. We came to a truck stop and Ken asked, 'Gerry, do you need breakfast?' We got to Des Moines. I was rooming with Chick Balon. Chick hooked us up with two girls and we missed curfew. I was benched by Ken. He said there would be fines and told me, 'Let the other players decide how much.' Nothing ever happened."

Although Ken could be fierce about fines sometimes, at others he was not. Once in St. Paul, he found some guys out of their own room playing cards in another after curfew. He fined John Ferguson, Eddie Long and Bob McCusker \$50 each. At the end of the playoffs, Fergie told the others, "Ken gave me my fifty dollars back." Eddie and Bob were not so lucky. Bob explained, "Fergie was making less than we were, and he had a kid, that's why."

The secret was that Ken knew what would work with people. "He could handle them," said Eddie, "Like Andy Voykin and Con Madigan, that wasn't easy. He knew, you don't have to like each other, but you have to get along while you're here and respect each other."

Ken had clear rules about how people should live. "He liked living clean," said Repka. The players liked to go to bars. That caused a conflict. "It was somebody's birthday," Gus Braumberger remembers, "And Ken had had calls about players being in bars. He telephoned the players to drink at home. Then there would be no rumors. There was another birthday two or three weeks later. After the team meeting, everyone met at the Berghoff Gardens, everyone was there. Ken comes in. Automatic \$25 fine. The next day at practice he damn near killed us. Stops and starts for an hour. There were guys getting sick. I guess we stayed out of bars real quick after that."

Since it was clear that hockey players weren't going to live like seminary students, why did Ken expend so much energy on keeping them in line? "He was very particular," said Jack Loser. "The reputation of the team meant a lot to him."

Len Thomson saw another reason. "He was very against drinking athletes. Don't drink, don't smoke. His background was in junior hockey, where he was coaching kids and he had to act like a parent to them. He changed later, lightened up."

There was no doubt he had a light side, too. "He used humor during practice, it was great," said Gerry Randall. He could even see the funny side if the joke was on him, as on the grumpy morning when Terry Pembroke said, "Watch it guys, Vi burned his toast this morning." Glenn Ramsay said it was a very dry humor, kept inside himself.

Another side to the psychological handling of the players sometimes prompted Ken to say things he didn't mean. During contract negotiations, still a matter between player and manager in those days, Cal Purinton found that Ken was shouting at him. Cal acknowledged that it was probably only an intimidation technique, but 'it was real to me at the time.'

Bob McCusker found that Ulyot would make comments to the newspapers. During the 1959 training camp in St. Paul, Ken was quoted as saying that McCusker, Thomson and Repka were holdouts. This came as a shock to them, and they saw Ken's public pronouncement as a ploy. However, he might have been irritated by the fact that everyone on the team had rejected his first offers for that year's contracts. He had not offered enough. An added stress was that the K's first exhibition game was against a new team from Omaha, which the K's lost 11-0. They made a comeback in the second game, but Ken was scathing about players who lost 11-0 wanting more money.

The bottom line was, as Ted Wright said, "He knew when to be friendly and when to be tough." Not all the curfew violators had the same trouble either. Terry Pembroke said that some players were 'animals' in Des Moines and Eddie worried about curfew violations. Ken threatened a \$500 fine. Both Cal and Terry ignored the curfew, and nothing happened. "If you did your job, he overlooked it," explained Terry. "He and I had an agreement, I had no curfew." Gerry Sillers agreed, saying that if you worked hard, Ken gave you space. "Paul Shmyr and I worked hard."

Ken had views on what to eat, too. "He told us to drink orange crush, not Coke," said Reggie, "And no cake or cookies on the day of a

game.” John Bloom remembered that Ken never wanted the guys to drink water during a game, so there was no water on the bench. One game, a player asked for water and Bloom got some between periods. He reached the bench with it as the period started, the players drank cups of water, played great and won. Ken complained to him about the water, but Bloom’s reply was, “We won, didn’t we?” Terry Pembroke observed that the myth about drinking during games was only broken when the powerful Russian Army team first visited the US and the players were seen drinking Cokes during games.

Another of Ken’s strengths was in the recruiting of players. His years of playing and coaching in the west meant that he had both contacts and knowledge of players out there. He seemed to know everyone in the hockey world. “He brought the best of the westerners here,” said Thornson.

He was careful about the chemistry of the team, balancing both the talents and the personalities to find a winning combination. “Many good players got traded,” said Chase, “Lifestyle, habits, attitudes.” Gerry Sillers laughed, “Sooner or later, Ken would get the tough guys. I’m sure he got the best of any trade.” Ken explained that the benchmark for a player was twenty goals, but that experience and skating mattered, too.

“Ken knew what it was about,” said Dave Richardson, “He got the right players and deserves credit for developing players.” In Dave Norris’ opinion, “Any player who was bigger than the team had to go.” The ensemble was everything. Con Madigan agreed.

There came a time to make cuts. “By January first, Ken knew if he had a team to compete,” said Randall, “If not, he’d start unloading.” When he cut a player, he’d phone around and find him a place to go, according to Dick Zimmerman.

Ken himself says, “In the hockey business, you can pick up the phone and talk to anybody. Sometimes you have to spend the money and take a chance bringing in new players. It was usually longer than a couple of games. If we couldn’t keep them, we would get them a hockey job. It was easier to do that than pay to send them home.”

Another side of his awareness of hockey personnel was that he knew the players on the opposing teams also. Len Ronson observed, “He knew the right combination and right people to put on the ice against other teams, too.”

One of Ulliot’s most important contributions was to the IHL. “There were six teams in the IHL when I accepted the job, only three or

four by the time I got here," Ken remembers. "We talked to people who had money in Louisville and Port Huron and got the numbers back up. The league was always in doubt. The teams helped one another. For example one year, Toledo was going to fold with only five games left. I paid their payroll for five weeks. We're still waiting to be repaid." Waslawski says that Ken might even sign a big player, then trade him to benefit another team in the league. "He saved the IHL." Stanutz agreed, "He could do things as he wanted with no one interfering."

Ullyot would also lend players to teams who were in need, to keep the other teams competitive. When rosters were limited, only a injury or two could cause a crisis. "The best thing about the IHL was the unselfishness," he says, "It was protection against a bad year."

The chronic instability of the league was a problem which took up more and more of Ullyot's time. He found that being both coach and general manager was difficult and Vi, his wife, urged him to step aside from the coaching. He did. "When Ken was gone, we tried to keep playing the same way," said Repka.

As general manager he still watched the practices and games, but was less of a presence in the dressing room. On the other hand, when he spoke, people listened respectfully. "He made the game very simple," said Robbie Irons, "He illustrated it and it seemed simple, but he expected you to listen." His main involvement with the players was at contract negotiating time.

Ken Ullyot's accomplishments as a coach are many, but some sense of them can be seen in the statistics for the first fifteen years of the team. The glory year was 1959-60, with a record of 50-16-2. For the first six years of the team (before Ullyot's arrival), the sum was 153-191-24. Ullyot's eight years as coach, which followed, left a record of 267-192-21. In Reggie Primeau's opinion, he is underappreciated and remains 'one of the greatest minor league coaches we've seen.' Said Johnny Bloom, "He gave Fort Wayne something to be proud of." And Cal Purinton: "He looked after his guys."

Ullyot's right-hand man for his twenty-five years at the center of Komets history is Colin Lister, "a real gentleman who dedicated his life to Fort Wayne's youth," according to Bob Chase.

Lister was born in Australia and worked in banks there, in England and in western Canada. His first boarding house in Prince Albert was filled with hockey fans, who invited him to a game. That started a love affair that's not over yet. Within a few weeks, he was on the board

of the junior team and began coaching juvenile (he taught himself to skate and coach from a book). When Ullyot arrived to coach the junior team, he and Lister became friends.

Within a few days of his arrival in Fort Wayne, Ullyot phoned Lister with an invitation to help sort out the financial mess. "There was a box of bills up to here," he says. Lister accepted immediately.

Ernie Berg's departure left the newcomers in charge of the business. Van Orman had his own affairs and they saw him no more than once a week. "Ken ran the business," says Colin. "But most of his business was on the ice."

The player salaries were small. The big stars, Stone and Thomson, earned \$150 a week; rookies like John Ferguson in 1959-60 could expect \$85-\$90.

The players were paid in cash throughout Colin's reign as treasurer. This seems odd in the days of the cashless society, but many employees were paid that way in the 1950s and 60s.

Colin Lister's self-effacing style might lead people to overlook him, but his contribution to the team was enormous, ensuring the smooth running of the financial works behind the scenes. At the same time, he had warm relationships with many of the players, who had a high respect for his kindness and generosity. As well as his hockey interests, he has always been very involved in boys' baseball in the city.

Rob Laird gives Lister credit for his distinguished coaching and scouting career. "He is responsible for my being in the game today. My retirement from playing was looming in the summer of 1985. The ownership of the team was changing and Ron Ullyot the coach had left. I was working at Nob Brick and running a hockey school. I called Colin and suggested I might be able to coach. So Colin did it, I don't know why, he said, 'Let's give him a chance.' I'm still here because of him. I thank Colin for the opportunity. I inherited a great team."

Speaking of Ken's first year, Glenn Ramsay remembered, "There were a lot of player changes. Ken was taking his first look at the league. It didn't take him long to make the Komets a top team. He had good players, and he got the best out of what he had."

The record for the year was 32-27-1 and the K's ended in second place, after Louisville. In the semifinals, they defeated the Indianapolis Chiefs 4 games to 1 but lost in the finals to Louisville 4 games to 2.

A highlight of the year came on 8 November, when they trounced the Troy Bruins 17-1 in the Coliseum. The Bruins were

shorthanded, with only 11 players, and missing their two biggest scorers. The hapless Bruin goalie was twenty year old Murray MacPherson, who had been lent to Troy by Fort Wayne. He played three games with them that season, and a total of eight games in the IHL the following year, three of them with the Komets.

There were two hat tricks in the game, one by Art Stone and the other by Bob McCusker. Rookie McCusker started his IHL scoring stats with these three goals. Stone's three goals had the distinction of all being unassisted.

Later in the year, Ulliot told Bud Gallmeier that the team's weakness was in its defense. McCusker retorted, "We had the best damn defense in the league." Gallmeier, however, agreed with Ulliot, who proceeded to remedy the situation for 1959-60.

Sticks, Masks and Skates

"The trainer and I would determine where equipment came from, and how much we bought," explains Colin Lister, "Although sometimes players bought things on their own with my permission. Hockey players are fussy about their equipment."

One of the first things Eddie Shore taught Reggie Primeau in his short time in Springfield was about the lie of the stick—Eddie liked the players with their knees bent. Ken Ulliot says a high lie is better for shooters, low for stick handlers. He used a 7. "You could tell someone to change their lie and this would improve them," he says.

Many of the Komets seem to prefer a 6: Wright, Waslawski, Alton White, Sillers, McCusker, Kastelic, Burgers, Veysey. Paul Shmyr preferred a 7, as did George Stanutz, who said, "I wanted to stand up as straight as I could—if you're too bent you can't put the puck where you want." Repka and Strueby preferred a 5. Colin Chin says he changed his stick all the time, from a lie 5 to 4.5, and taped the knobs and curves. For comparison, the Gordie Howe stick on display at the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto is a 6; one Bobby Orr there is a 4, the other a 5.

A big development during the Komets era was the curved blade, the invention of which is credited to Bobby Hull and Stan Mikita. "Mikita invented the curve by accident rifling the puck," said Sillers. "I liked a heel curve and twisted at the toe, to get the puck up," explained Rob Tudor, "You could still pass without flipping it."

"On Saturday or Wednesday morning before a game, you'd see them fixing their sticks," said goalie Gerry Randall, "Torching them and then bending them under a door."

John Goodwin said, "I liked a light stick. I could shoot better, feel the puck better. Eddie used a big heavy stick. When we started curving, you could shoot harder. Ken didn't like it because you can't backhand the puck as well. Eventually the league stopped the size of the curve because the puck would start fluttering and goalies could not judge, it might drop and not go where expected in their glove. For us, with the curve, the puck would stay on the blade better." Ted Wright commented, "The backhand went out when the curve came in—the curve was the wrong way."

Goodwin's 15 ounce stick was changed to a 22 ounce stick similar to Long's and Gary Young's at Ulliot's insistence. "He can hardly lift it off the ice now," Ken commented. Jumbo scored two goals during his first game with the new stick.

Sid Veysey recently saw a stick from his Komets year (1975-76) and said, "It had a small curve and a shaved handle. It was so straight compared to today, I couldn't use it now."

The players would customize their sticks to suit themselves, and what they did might change as they tried new things. "I would get my stick curved and shaved on the day of the game, and tape it," said Waslawski. "We'd have a stick and a spare, but there were extras available." Kotsopoulos liked a little curve toward the middle and end. Scully was famous for his curve.

"Steve Gaber would shave his stick till it was round. It would take an hour to get it as he wanted," said George Polinuk, "They did their own, only I would have to clear up afterward." Terry Reincke has a similar story: "Jimmy Hrycuik would spend an hour a stick, cutting, shaving and smoothing with a wood rasp. He would take a rectangle and round it to where his bottom hand was." "You could spend an hour on it," said Paul Shmyr, "And then break it first time out." Todd Strueby laughs, "For some guys, fixing their stick was a religious experience."

Lionel Repka liked to fix the stick from toe to heel, planing it off so it was round at the bottom. He fixed it so that there would be more wood on the puck. Joe Kastelic didn't do anything except to ensure there was no tape on the front of the blade. Later he curved the blade a little. George Stanutz did not shape the stick, he was contemptuous of shaping and said, "Most guys would just saw it off to suit yourself."

Taping the handle was also a matter of personal preference. Steve Fletcher liked tape on the shaft to keep a firm grip. The feel of a knob in the palm of the hand was good for Repka; it would blacken his glove.

At first the sticks came from Main Auto on West Wayne near the Van Orman Hotel. They supplied a lot of equipment to the team. They carried the Northland brand and the players would simply go in and choose the sticks they wanted. "Stoney [Paul] Brockmeyer and Emil Sitko worked there for years and sold us stuff," says Polinuk, "Northland was the stick then." Zanier said they had about thirty types of goalie sticks to choose from.

When the idea of custom-made sticks came up, the players turned to Northland. These were made in St. Paul, and the players would stop at the factory to begin the process of having a pattern made to order. The alternative stick was a Wally, made in Wallaceburg, Ontario by the Louisville Slugger company. Northlands were better and more expensive. "I can't believe Ken got us those," said McCusker.

The IHL later had a league contract with the Louisville company, and Wallys were the rule. "We got a good price," said Lister.

In the NHL, the sticks were all custom-made, but in the IHL, that was not always the case. All the players wanted their own sticks, said Reincke, but "this is the IHL so you do what management wants." The players would make custom sticks and then send the pattern cut halfway down and specify the length. "We had to share the handle, it was too heavy," said one player. The minimum order was 3-4 dozen, "or 5-6 dozen for Terry Pembroke because he used so many," laughs Reincke.

In later years, Joe Franke used KOHO sticks, and the team would order two dozen at a time. The company would make four and put the other two away toward the next order. When the K's visited the Northland factory in the 60s, Ted Wright remembers ordering 2-3 dozen at a time. The custom-made sticks bore the player's name.

The first year he was here, Chuck Adamson had a Northland, but then he was given a Wally, which he calls, 'a piece of lumber, too heavy.' He tried to have Northland sticks specified in his contract, but Ulliyot said no, perhaps because of the league contract. Chuck was sorry, as Northland had a pattern for his stick.

Sticks have changed over the years, becoming higher and with a longer blade, and changing from wood to aluminum or fiberglass. "The aluminum sticks still break a lot," says Joe Franke. "The graphite

(fiberglass) ones are better." One player said the aluminum ones got better shots.

Sticks were a big budget item. In fact, Joe Franke said that IHL teams were always over the stick budget. Waslawski estimated he would be lucky to get three games out of a stick. Others didn't pay much attention to it. "I never worried," said Kelly Hurd, "I was notorious for sticks, so were Fletch and Chinner. One year I used eight dozen. I don't know how Joe [Franke] kept up with us." Zanier said that when he found a stick he especially liked, he saved it for use in games and used others in practice. That way, he could extend the life of the favored stick. Strueby also kept a stick going, sometimes for a month. "I came from a small town, you used the same stick all year and you only had your skates sharpened once, whether they needed it or not."

Franke's estimate was at least a stick a game for 82 games, or 6-7 dozen per player. "Pokey broke three or four sticks every practice. He went through twelve dozen in 1992-93." A dozen goal sticks cost \$320.

Sometimes players simply wanted a new stick. "They would get whippy, flexy after two or three games. They'd say, 'I want a new stick,' and if you said no, they'd go out and smash it on the goal, break it and come back and get a new one," said Reincke.

"The smartest thing the Frankes have done," he says, "Is to promote stick night. Selling sticks to fans is the best idea."

Skates are particular to each player because they must fit well. Colin Lister says that skates were bought from sales reps by the players to ensure that they had what they wanted, and the bill was sent to the team. These might be Tackaberrys (Tacks, made by CCM), Bauers or Langs. "I always wore Bauer 1000," said Hurd, "I have flat feet and they're better." Kotsopoulos didn't like Bauer and preferred CCM, as did Goodwin. Most players have two pair of skates, one to start, with a new pair partway through the year. A pair might last two seasons.

"The old skates," says Ted Wright, "Were kangaroo leather. You'd fill them with hot water till they were wet, then you'd let them dry on your feet to make a mold. Then you'd break them in." According to Waslawski, the new pair would be used in practice until they were worn in, perhaps two weeks.

Ron Ullyot introduced the new Lange molded skates to his teammates in the early 70s. Bob Fitchner wore them. "The were molded plastic with a lining," said Terry Reincke. Bill Welker describes them as 'very warm, very stiff, but too bulky for many guys.' Fitchner was not a

naturally talented skater. "The stiffness of the boot helped make him the player he became." Bob explains, "I had a tendency to go over on my ankles and they gave more stability. They're good for shot blocking, which is an advantage for a guy who kills penalties, which I was. Also their consistency is better, they don't get soft." He still wears them.

In assessing the molded skates, Welker continued, "Most guys like their skates two sizes too small, with the toes curled up at the end. They want control and they wear their skates like that because of the control." The molded skates, although not popular, did help with control.

Now, players have custom made skates, still two pairs a year. The manufacturer keeps a template on file and the player gets the brand he wants. If the player's needs were similar to an established player, he might 'inherit' someone else's pattern. Burgers says that he had Rod Langway's stick and Scott Stevens' skates.

"If the blade wore out," said Was, "You could replace it." Kotsy kept the same skates for four years by putting new blades on them, "Joe did it for me."

In the early days there were no helmets. "You'd have been laughed out of the rink," according to Stanutz. Cal Purinton was one of the first K's to wear a helmet. He'd sustained a head injury in junior which required it, but he says no one gave him a hard time.

"One of the main reasons helmets came in," says Was, "was when Bill Masterton of the Northstars died on the ice from a head injury. I decided to start wearing one then, he was a good friend of mine." People did make remarks about it, he says.

Dr. Marvin Priddy was very concerned with the helmet question. The IHL had a league rule for one year that helmets were mandatory, but the players refused, so the league rescinded the rule. Priddy was an Indiana delegate to the American Medical Association and took a resolution to their annual meeting advocating helmets. It had huge support. The AMA legal counsel advised him that the NHL would refuse to follow the advice, which was true. However, he was also told to be patient. Helmets would be worn in juvenile hockey, and as those players matured, they would become the rule in the pro leagues. This is what happened. "I think I can claim to be the father of the hockey helmet," said Priddy.

The effect of helmets, as Bob Chase found, was that people had trouble recognizing the players. There was another effect, too. "The

trouble with helmets," says Gerry Sillers, "Is that you break too many hands fighting." Nowadays, players get a new helmet each year.

Masks were a goalie's protection initially. Jacques Plante of the Montreal Canadiens started the trend to goalies' masks. Gerry Randall had used a mask during practice in junior. He did not in Fort Wayne, until a shot from Dubchak hit him in the head. After this injury, he began wearing the mask.

In 1962 Ulliyot suggested to Chuck Adamson that he wear a mask during practice. "It was too hot," said Chuck. "The guys would hit it, knock it sideways." The first mask was close to the face, not like the masks of today, which are more like a baseball catcher's mask. Plante's mask consisted of bars and holes, not solid to the face, and by the 1966-67 season Chuck had one like it.

"At an exhibition game even the nose came off the first one," he said, "My nose got cut, so I took the nose off completely." The mask most K's fans would recognize as Chuck's was molded from his own face by a maker in Hamilton, New York. It was repaired, but never replaced. "You'd end up getting black and blue, but you wouldn't get cut," he says, "I wish I'd worn it earlier." He'd had a broken nose and cheek, cuts too many to mention.

Today's players all wear masks, necessary with the changes in hockey technology. Not everyone approves completely. "The problem with masks," says Carey Lucyk, "Is that the players don't learn how to save their face. With modern equipment they don't learn how to take a body check, they're too protected. You must learn how to protect yourself." He shrugs. "You can buy teeth."

Goalies' pads were important too. "They were not as wide then as now," says Randall. "I was tall and had to be measured. The new ones took so long to break in. I'd help them by rubbing with neet's foot oil, and bending them under the bench to keep the angle. I used a straight stick, no changes, with a good knob on the end with tape so the blocker glove would stick to it." Chuck's pads were also made to measure. The outside roll would get soft, so he had a rope put in to keep it stiff. In 1967, a set of pads would cost \$150; now they are \$12-1500.

He wore arm pads but not shoulder pads, and his glove had a fiberglass inset. He went through eight a year of those, as they would break or get soft. "I was always tinkering with the equipment," he says, "Sponge or tape to protect my inner elbow, something. My index finger would be so swollen I couldn't bend it."

Reno Zanier's idol was Terry Sawchuk, and he visited a shop in Detroit to buy a glove identical to the one Sawchuk used.

As well as sticks, pads in the fifties were bought at Main Auto. Now pads are custom made. "I wore the same shin pads from first game to last," said Goodwin, "They fit so good and were so light." Primeau's pads, preserved for posterity, still have scrap pieces of foam taped into them. Alton White had molded elbow pads, 'hard like a weapon,' the old ones had a foam cover. Comparing today's elbow pads to those of the seventies, Sid Veysey said, "When you elbowed somebody then, it hurt but it didn't knock him out like now." During the tight money days, Polinuk cut up old tires to hold pads in place; friction tape was expensive.

Some players liked long underwear underneath, but Thomson found it too hot and cut it off. The trainer had to wash it. George Polinuk took it home with him ("It was okay, he was a bachelor") but then the K's bought a washer and dryer for use at the Coliseum. The players' wives were never glad to see a bag of equipment coming into the house after a road trip.

The pants haven't changed much, and they last three or four seasons now, because the shell can be changed.

The first jerseys were wool. They wore well but were heavy and absorbed moisture. "Our equipment weighed ten pounds at the beginning of a game," said Ted Wright, "And twenty at the end." Cal Purinton said, "Our equipment was awful. I'd lose 7-11 pounds a game." Pembroke remembers a game when he lost 13.

There were always two sets of jerseys, for at home and away. Last year's set were worn in practice. Ullyot says one year they had to use the sweaters from the year before, for economy.

They tried black jerseys once, but Reno Zanier had trouble seeing the puck against them. He would only hear it when it hit the boards. This was a symptom of his bad eyesight, but the K's stopped wearing black. His eyesight is still the cause of remarks, even jokes, by those who played with him. Typical of these is Ken Ullyot's "By far the best goaltender we ever had was Reno Zanier, considering he was blind."

"You could always tell who went in the corners," said the Zimmermans, "The elbows of their jerseys would wear out and need repair."

In the 60s, the jerseys changed to nylon, which was lighter and afforded better protection. At the time of the logo switch from Captain

Komet to the ball of fire, they became nylon mesh, which was cooler still. The players liked it. "We didn't get Cooper, which was the best," said Reincke, "We stuck with second tier, Winwell."

Some players preferred tighter sleeves, some looser. Steve Fletcher used velcro on his, but "in Atlanta I wore a goalie's jersey and what a difference that made. I could throw my punches any way I wanted." Joe Franke notes that regular players are not allowed to wear goalie cut. The trainer has to know the rule book on equipment and IHL brass might well have come to a game to check that everything in use was legal.

Players used to be able to keep their old jerseys, but they are now auctioned off to fans. Any spares are destroyed.

The equipment has become more sophisticated over the years, and some players have found special pieces which they like to include. "McKee looked like the robocop when he was getting dressed," laughs Fletch. When he returned for a special game in 1997, Adamson found the equipment 'better and lighter,' but he had trouble knowing how to get it on and Joe Franke had to show him how. "The equipment's better and they can skate better now. And of course the money's better," said Con Madigan.

Glenn Ramsay

In Glenn Ramsay's long IHL career (1956-1974), he played in 1053 games with eight teams, which is number two in the IHL record book (#1 is Jock Callendar with 1054). He won the Norris trophy as best goalie six times and is considered by many as the best netminder of his time.

He grew up in Sudbury, Ontario and played junior in Guelph with an amazing array of future NHL stars. His first two pro seasons were spent with the Cincinnati Mohawks, who were in the fourth and fifth years of their five year IHL championship streak. "The Cincie team were Montreal farmhands, they could have beat NHL teams," says Tom McVie, "We'd go to Cincie and somebody'd ask, 'Is Ramsay really so good?' and we'd say, 'I don't know, we're never in their end.'" Strangely, even the powerhouse Mohawks could not generate crowds at their home games and the team folded in 1958. At the resulting league draft, Ulliot picked up Ramsay.

His teammates and opponents discuss his style:

Robbie Irons: "The first guy who impressed me was Glenn Ramsay. He had a style like Terry Sawchuk, the way he moved, he had control of himself. He didn't make moves he didn't need to."

Gus Braumberger: "Glenn is in a class of his own. He's the best goaltender I've ever played with or against in the IHL. No wonder Cincinnati won all those championships. He positioned himself and played the angles so well and was consistent on the road or at home."

Gerry Randall: "Ramsay had the best glove hand, the best in the IHL. He was quick. When you've got a good glove hand there are no rebounds. He could be down and still get the puck, he always had his glove up. He and I are both from Sudbury, we had some real battles."

Chuck Adamson: "He was a sprawler, he could stop the puck on his knees, on his ass. He could go to a party and the next night he stoned us."

John Goodwin: "Glenn was the toughest. I played with him in Omaha, he was the premier goaltender in this league. A good team man."

George Polinuk: "Glenn was good under pressure, he didn't fold. Once going to Indy in my car, it was slippery. I was driving and we had an accident, but no one was hurt. Glenn was in the back seat, he continued reading a book."

Fan Gary Gardner lived in Toledo when Ramsay was a shining Blade. "He was stiffing teams over and over, the big save night after night. Nobody could beat him." Asked about Ramsay's backup, he said, "No need for one, Ramsay was always there."

Bud Gallmeier described Ramsay in a game against the Komets on 25 November 1965: "Ramsay's most spectacular—and, to him, most frantic—moments came at 18.50 of the second period when the Komets had a two-man advantage for one minute and 31 seconds. The Komets kept firing the puck at Ramsay with machine-gun rapidity for the entire penalty period, but he wouldn't yield. To make his plight more precarious—if that be possible—he lost his stick once but turned his chest into an impregnable shield to ride out the storm."

The Journal-Gazette's Carl Wiegman wrote of a game against Omaha on 26 February 1963: "The Komets had many opportunities to score as Omaha was frequently skating short due to penalties. But they couldn't capitalize on the man advantage. For the last 45 seconds, Adamson left goal and Ken Ullyot put six forwards on the ice. Then the

Knights got a penalty, so they were two men ahead. Ramsay still beat them." Ramsay also had the flu that night.

Ramsay spent only a single season with the K's. Glenn said, "Ullyot had a system and if you didn't play that way, he'd get rid of you." Chase said, "He had to trade him to get other things and improve the team." The K's sold Ramsay for cash, which dismayed many fans after the previous season's performance. Bud Gallmeier wrote that in some ways Ullyot sold half his team when he sold that one player, referring to Ramsay as 'invincible.'

"One of the toughest things in my life was leaving Fort Wayne," Ramsay says now, "I liked it there."

Players Come and Go

One factor in the players' lives which fans may not think about much is the fact that they are liable to be sent away at 48 hours' notice. For some, this may be part of the adventure of hockey life, but those with the responsibilities of wives and children find it wearing. Colin Chin said you put it out of your mind and played.

Being traded unexpectedly has an air of rejection and failure which may also be troublesome. "In Detroit, I sat out thirteen games, I never knew what was happening even after warmup, whether I'd play or not," remembered John Hilworth, "Then I was dropped, sent to Edmonton. Then I went to a farm team in Houston."

"I was sent to Omaha in 1960," said Gus Braumberger, "Sold unexpectedly. Then I went to Indy, traded 3 for 2. I finally said I needed stability and some real money, and retired when I was 23."

Moe Bartoli observed, "You never knew when you'd have to move. It's not fair on families to move around so much. And not worth it for the money, either. Back then, the moves were not paid for either, only the gas. Now, if it's a haircut, it's paid for."

The players' wives also experience the uncertainty. "It's something you have to live with," said Sonja Primeau, "When you had to, you just picked up and went. We were young, so we could cope with it better. Once when Reggie was sent to Three Rivers from Saskatoon, I had to stay behind to make the arrangements about our house and the children." Tom and Arlene McVie made 42 moves and lived in 18 states. Arlene commented, "It was nice for you, but I was always one town behind you." One player, asked how his wife coped with the sudden moves, replied, "I've never asked her."

Kelly Hurd left during the IHL expansion draft of 1995. "Fort Wayne could protect a certain number of players, they only had to offer you league average salary. I wanted more. I think my injury made me vulnerable too. So I was dropped. It was the toughest part of my career. I never knew the coach [of the San Francisco Spiders], he had his own brand of players and I never got ice. After being on two championship teams, I wanted more. I'd had enough by Christmas, thought of retiring and asked to be traded. If the player doesn't want to play there, better to trade them."

Which is the other side of the coin, when the player wants to go. "It's a tough pill for the management to swallow if the player walks," said Doug Rigler. Forty years later, people are still mystified by Reno Zani's last-minute decision not to attend the Komets training camp.

The parting of the ways might be mutual too. "If there's a conflict of personalities," said Joe Kastelic, "People get traded, it's okay and doesn't have to do with how good they are."

When the coach is changed, players change too. "There was very little stability here with the team in the fifties, every coach brings his own legion of guys," said George Stanutz, "I had enough of that. There were lots of players and few places, management had the upper hand. It could be a matter of \$15 a week if you came or went."

If the coach made many changes searching for the right chemistry, players came and went like a revolving door. Surveying things at the beginning of 1983, Bud Gallmeier said that most of the players had been with the team since the beginning of the season. The previous year there had been constant changes, which cut into the team's profits.

Only a day might separate playing with a team and then facing it as an opponent. "It is odd," confirmed John Baldassari, "But it's just like a war, playing another team. They didn't hold back and neither did I."

A player might retire and return, too. The game is in your blood, and when August comes you get the itch, training camp's coming. Ted Wright quit and worked at International Harvester, but missed hockey and came back. "During expansion in 1966, I was bought by LA, but I didn't want to move. My kids were happy here and we had good feelings about the place." Luckily he was able to return to the K's after the break.

"The team atmosphere is appealing," remarks Todd Strueby. "You take it for granted when you're playing. I love the game and I miss playing pro now." Doug Johnston said that when he retired, he couldn't go to the games for the first year, or even watch hockey on television. "A

special bond still exists," he says. John Baldassari mentioned the camaraderie and being in shape, "but I didn't miss the travel."

At some point the player himself knows that it is time to think about retirement. Injuries might take their toll, and growing circumstances at home make a change in attitude. "Every morning, I'd get up and feel like an old man," said Martin Burgers, "I knew I'd never make the NHL now, at 27. I needed to get a real job. I loved the game so much, but I was being paid a regular person's wages, it's not enough to retire on. Players may have a ton of talent, then a major injury ruins their career, wrecks their knee, their back. The fans don't know, but the players do. What means more is what your teammates thought. They know, not the fans."

It boils down to the fact that a hockey player needs to be more than physically strong; he needs a mental strength too, to take the moves, the changes, the uncertainties.

Players Come and Go: The Fifties

Len Wharton began his career in 1944 and finished a decade later in Fort Wayne. He had a single NHL game, in 1944-45. He played for three years in Toledo with Alex Wood, who brought him here. "I told him I would only come if I had a job to fall back on when I was finished playing hockey," Len says, "So he took me to see Berg and Van Orman. They sent me to Les Fry at Joslyn Manufacturing [later Slater Steel]. It sounded good and I started there in January 1953. I was there for thirty years. Les Fry gave me time off to play. At the end of the second year, Fry said it was time to make up my mind, hockey or Joslyn. I told him there was no mind to make up."

In Toledo, Wharton was the policeman, but with the small team in Fort Wayne, Wood said, "We don't need you getting penalties. Stay on the ice." His job was keeping pucks out of the net.

Jacques Gagné made a big impression in 1955-56, with 58 points in 57 games. He left for Quebec, but Ulliyot brought him back in 1957-58. "He has one of the hardest slapshots in the league," said a program from that year, but Gagné did not shine. "He wasn't serious about hockey," said several players, indicating his off-ice interests. "He was suave, like Charles Boyer," said George Stanutz, "Except he didn't know who Charles Boyer was." Jacques went on to Louisville and Indianapolis, but an eye injury cut short his career.

Lloyd Maxfield had indicated his abilities in two seasons with the K's and was Port Huron's leading scorer in the mid-60s. In 1964-65 he had 121 points. He later coached the Flags. "He was a playing coach," remembered Ron Burman, "He knew how to handle people and he knew the game inside out."

Art Stone was a small but very talented centerman, who played in three different leagues (IHL, WHL, AHL) in the 1953-54 season. He returned to Fort Wayne in 1954-55, "and immediately became a cornerstone of the hockey club," according to Chase. He remained here until 1960 when he retired. He coached the Komets in 1961-62. *The Journal-Gazette* wrote on 29 August 1962, "Always one of the team's most productive offensive players, Stone had a top season in 1957-58 with 78 points," and pointed out that on 8 November 1958, he'd scored nine points in one game, three goals and six assists.

He was a playmaker and Len Ronson says, "If you played with Art, you'd get your goals." Glenn Ramsay agreed, "He was similar to Thomson, very good and tricky, an old-time centerman who passed the puck." Despite his size (he weighed 155 pounds), it was known that he could protect even larger players. "He was a natural center, very unselfish and a team leader," said Chase.

In the 1956-57 season, Bobby Lalonde got flushed in the kisser and sent to the hospital. It was the end of the first period and the K's had a dilemma: they had no backup goalie. Stone offered to fill in. The Komets were leading 2-0, then suddenly it was 2-2. Art made 28 saves, and the Komets won 4-2. He also filled in on WOWO. Bob Chase was ill and Stone was hurt, so he broadcast the game. Chase says, "He got into a flow and did a pretty nice job." He later worked as Chase's color man.

Shorty Melanchuk was a hard-playing stay at home defenseman who spent the 1958-59 season and left partway through 1959-60. A classy dresser off the ice, Shorty later played against the K's in Des Moines and Toledo.

Mild-mannered Orrin Gould spent five seasons with the Komets and was an all-star in 1958-59. "A solid offensive player who could move the puck up to you," was Braumberger's description. "He was a self-made hockey player," said Stanutz. "A good shot blocker. He skated better backwards than forwards." Polinuk agreed about his skating, "A good skater and good for morale too." He left after injury problems.

Bud Gallmeier observed about Orrin: "He did little checking, but what he lacked here he more than made up for by his deft skill in stealing the puck away from an advancing forward."

Len Ronson's junior years were spent in Galt and St. Catharines, where he was on a line with the very young Bobby Hull. Here, he was famous for his shot and setting a scoring record in 1959-60 with 62 goals. He was probably unique in the IHL because his scoring points that year (109) were more than double his PIM (53). Although he was not known as a skater, Bill Richardson said, "He had the best shot I saw, a wrist shot." Thomson termed it a snap shot and Polinuk credits Ronson for starting the slapshot here. He could use all of them well.

Hard practicing was one reason for all those goals. "I was always one of the last guys off the ice," he said, "I'd have bets with the goalies [Ramsay and others] I'd get so many shots in out of ten, at fifty cents a shot. They'd do that to make the player try harder. The goalies always came out on top. It was hard to score 3 out of 10, but you'd keep trying."

After the practice, Ronson enjoyed a beer. Ken told him off about it, but Len said, "It takes me six beers to quench my thirst, then I need some to enjoy myself."

George Drysdale tells about players' nicknames in the 50s: Eddie Calhoun had the nickname of "Bulldog" because of his resemblance to Winston Churchill. Billy Richardson had the nickname of "Stainless Steel" for his resemblance to one of the characters in the Dick Tracy comic strip. His square jaw was the key. On occasion, the team would take the train to Johnstown and back for Sunday afternoon games. One time on their return to Fort Wayne, Ivan Walmsley was late and somebody threw all his equipment off the train. He had to take a bus back and of course that resulted in a nickname for him, "Greyhound."

Polinuk said about Bobby Lalonde, "He looked like a skinny little office worker, but he was a good goalie." As for Bill Leblanc, "Wild Bill could use his stick, he had a look about him." His opinion of Red Olsen was, "He was quiet, kept to himself. A stay at home defenseman, but not too many defensemen would roam in those days."

Andy Voykin spent a season with the Sudbury Wolves of the NOHA before his two years in Fort Wayne. In 1959-60, he had 41 points and 162 PIM. "He could have played pro football," said Eddie Long. "He was a guy you liked to have around," said Polinuk, "He kept the guys going. The way he talked made you laugh." His name is always linked with his friend, Con Madigan.

Con remembers, "Andy and I played in all situations, we were good together. We did kill penalties too if Lionel or Duane went in. Andy was a defensive defenseman, I was more offensive. Andy would give me the puck. He could carry it too, don't kid yourself, and he did." Zanier said approvingly, "Andy stayed back, he'd clean up in front of the net."

Phil Hughes finished his thirteen-season career as the K's goalie in 1957-58. He was tall and thin, 6 foot 7 with his skates on according to Eddie.

"Hartley McLeod was the only player who put on after shave and combed his hair before he went on the ice," laughed George Stanutz, "Like he was going on a date." Hartley was another Komet who had previously played for Eddie Shore. He met Eddie at a bar in Springfield, Massachusetts, and Eddie wanted to demonstrate how to body check then and there. "I went flying," says Hartley.

He'd lied about his age to get going in hockey a little earlier. He was owned by Montreal and had played in Omaha and Edmonton before landing in Buffalo in 1954-55. Partway through the season, he came to Fort Wayne and stayed for three seasons.

The first Komet to die was Roman Besidowski, a member of the original 1952-53 team, who was killed in a skiing accident early in 1955.

At the beginning of his pro career, Norm Johnson played seven games with the Komets in 1954-55. He went on to play with various teams in the NHL and to star with the Portland Buckaroos and the Calgary Stampers of the WHL.

Bud Gallmeier enthused about Gus Braumberger, calling him gutsy and hard working. Lionel Repka remarked, "Gus Braumberger sure could skate. He'd be up and down the ice. He was one of those river skaters, they never get tired. He skated from the hips."

The Best Team I Ever Had

Ken Ullyot called the 1959-60 team 'the best team I ever had.' With a 50-16-2 record and a league-leading 102 points, it's obvious why. The players on this team also think of it as special, not only because of the winning record but because the chemistry and camaraderie created a unique mix.

A fourteen game winning streak which began on 24 November set a new IHL record and a pattern for the year. In a team of outstanding performances, number one had to be Reno Zanier, the new goaltender,

who battled for top goalie in the league throughout the season with Glenn Ramsay of St. Paul. The final decision was only made in the last two games of the season, which tipped in Ramsay's favor. Bob Reed credited defensemen Madigan, Voykin and Repka as a 'decisive factor' in Zanier's success.

Players who were on the roster all year were Len Ronson, Len Thomson, Bob McCusker, Eddie Long, Lloyd Maxfield, John Ferguson, Con Madigan, Duane Rupp, Lionel Repka, Andy Voykin, Art Stone and Reno Zanier. Stone was sidelined for several weeks with a knee injury, which led to Paul Strasser being called in from Toledo. After Stone's return, Strasser was dropped with the comment 'his legs are gone.'

Shorty Melanchuk started out the season with the team but after swinging a stick at Ken Ullyot during a game in late November, he left for Indianapolis. Art Hart arrived in midseason, which led to Gus Braumberger being sold to Omaha. Andy Milne came to help late in the season. Wayne Sproxtton played three games with the team.

One of the most dramatic events of the season was Zanier's accident on 4 February 1960. Aggie Kukulowicz of the St. Paul Saints tripped on Andy Voykin, and went crashing into Reno. The back of Aggie's skate caught the corner of Reno's mouth, gashing his chin and requiring thirty stitches. Reno could not eat solid food for a week and did not play again until 16 February. Filling in for him at first was Murray MacPherson, a former Minnesota high school all star goalie. He won his first game but lost the second despite making 43 saves. Marv Edwards, the Milwaukee goalie, was meant to play on 9 February, but his plane was rerouted to Cleveland and former Komet trainer Stan Fogg was rushed in. The K's won, 6-4. On 13 February Nipper O'Hearn, brother of Bibber O'Hearn who had played a few games with the Komets in 1954-55, came in for a single game.

After the complaints about defense in 1958-59, the issue was resolved this season by two pairs of dynamite defensemen. Duane Rupp's lacklustre performance in 1958-59 had led to his replacement by Lionel Repka in midseason. Art Stone's injury meant that Ullyot recalled Rupp and Repka-Rupp became a team to contend with. They were finesse players, cool and efficient. Gallmeier referred to Rupp late in the season as 'colorless but highly effective.' After Rupp had departed for a long career in the AHL and NHL, Gallmeier remembered him in a comparison with rookie Dunc McCallum in 1961. He said that Rupp

was a slow developer, but left a warm glow. Dunc, also a late starter, was a bright spot on the team in the 1960-61 season.

The other defensive pair were Con Madigan and Andy Voykin. Both tough guys, they quickly became crowd favorites and wasted no time in making themselves felt on the other teams. The newspapers referred to the 'added aggression' they brought. The *Journal Gazette* thought Madigan one of the most colorful players in the history of the team. Voykin's own colorful nature was illustrated by Gallmeier's note about the 15 November game: "Voykin created quite a stir among the fans in the second period when he appeared to be racing towards [referee Len] Loree but ended his spring by jumping into the penalty box." Loree had disallowed two Komets goals in the previous game. In late December credit for the big winning streak was given to the defensemen.

It was a year of falling records. The team's total points for the year (102) matched the league record set by the Cincinnati Mohawks. Len Ronson set a new record for goals in a single season (62). Eddie Long broke the IHL total points record on 9 January, when he had 411. Con Madigan set a new season penalty record (272 minutes).

The big scorers on the team were Len Ronson (109), Len Thornson (107), Bob McCusker (89) and Eddie Long (88). There were a lot of fifty-foot shots zooming by opposing goalies. The three who gave the K's most trouble were Ramsay, Carl Wetzel of Omaha and Lou Crowdis of Louisville. Wetzel was only twenty and at the start of a fifteen year career which would include NHL, AHL and US national teams. He also played eight games for the K's during the 1961 playoffs. "Wetzel was tough to score on," said Ronson.

Ronson and Thornson had played together in Indy and Huntington before coming to Fort Wayne. They made a great combo. "I had a good centerman in Len," said Ronson. "We fit well together, we were like two brothers from the first time we met. He knew where I was going and I knew where he was going. He was a big help to me scoring all those goals—it wasn't just me, it was Len and the right winger, too."

Here are some moments from 1959-60:

The recently retired Orrin Gould took over the public address system at the Coliseum during games for a short time. One of his former teammates said, "He was terrible."

The big rivalry of the season was with Louisville, with fights and hard checks the rule in every game. It resulted in a brawl on 21 November.

On 10 November another fracas with Toledo brought four 5 minute penalties, with an extra two minutes for Voykin.

When Stone was hurt, Ullyot moved Ferguson to left wing and McCusker to center. Their line with Long made a big impression. Long said, "We were lucky, we could all put the puck in the net."

On 6 December Gus Braumberger 'got loose about the blue line, skated in on Carl Wetzel, gave him a fake and then slipped the puck in the short side of the net,' according to Gallmeier. The *Journal Gazette* called this goal 'one of the most thrilling of the season.'

In the game of 22 December, Jean Therrien of the Milwaukee Falcons was stopped twice on breakaways by Zanier. After the second, Therrien picked the puck up and threw it in the net. In 1960-61, he spent a high-scoring season with the K's. He was a tough guy, who once gave Cy Whitewide an overhand right on the neck which put him to his knees. "I laughed with him after the game, though," says Cy.

When Braumberger was sold to Omaha on 27 December, Gallmeier called him 'one of the most popular players on the team' but said he was 'just too small.'

In two games this season (12 January and 1 April), everybody on the team except Reno was in the scoring column.

Throughout January, Con and Cy Whiteside of the Minneapolis Millers had a feud which went back and forth. Madigan refused to go to the penalty box on 28 January, instead threw down his gloves and stick, challenging all comers. Whiteside accepted and they fought for a full minute with plenty of punches. The game was delayed twenty minutes.

On 7 March, Gallmeier wrote, "Madigan registered the best checks of the day, twice slamming Warren Back to the ice. After the second one, Back skated off and didn't return." There was no penalty for the checks. He sent Back out of the game in the same way on 20 March.

The Komets clinched the league championship with games to spare, and then lost the last three games of the season, thereby missing the chance to set a new season points record.

Ardent fan John Shoda gave each player an inscribed belt buckle after the championship win.

Ken Ullyot's son Ron helped out behind the scenes that year. He remembers what it was like: "They came from behind so many times. I had the job of getting the pop for after the games. There was a certain time to go and get it and George Polinuk would remind me. The Komets

would be one goal behind. I'd leave and I could hear the fans cheering. I'd get back and they'd be one or two goals ahead. I always missed it."

Both playoff series were exceptional. The K's defeated Louisville in six games, and then fought St. Paul for seven more. Both series were tough, with exciting games, which included a 3-0 loss in the second game against St. Paul which Repka says was demoralizing, and, of course, The Longest Game, which went to four overtimes.

Despite not winning the cup, the team had won their first championship and it remains a significant year for all the players.

"We had the toughest team," says McCusker. "Hart was a Golden Gloves boxer, Con, Andy, Fergie too the toughest of them all. Repka, Ronson could fight. We must have had the most penalties too. Eddie and I were always killing penalties, we were shorthanded all the time. And we never lost a fight." In fact, Louisville had 1181 PIM that season and the K's 1102. "We played a lot and got tired," he continues. "But it was exciting and there were those characters—Con, Moe [Bartoli] and Grant Morton [a tough for Louisville]."

The addition of Hart and Milne partway through the season gave the team a boost. Hart arrived in mid-December, heralded by Ulliot with the words, "He sure can fly." Con observed, "He didn't score much but he could skate and kill penalties." Only at the end of his career did Art have seasons with more than thirty goals.

Milne came on 7 February. The previous season, he had been the sixth highest scorer in the IHL with the Troy Bruins. "They were brought in and scored big goals," said Long. "Two goals two minutes apart in Louisville, a great game." These were the goals which ended the first playoff series in Fort Wayne's favor.

Why was the team so good? Gus' assessment was 'well organized, good management, good coaching, quality players, the nicest guys you could play with, and if you were playing bad, other guys would help you out.'

George Polinuk summed up the season as, "No matter where we went, we did well. It was the best team you had, player for player the best year I ever played with." Eddie Long said, "It was team playing, not star playing. Ken coached that way. There were a lot of close games, with a different guy saving the day every time."

One big pro career which started during the 1959-60 season in Fort Wayne was John Ferguson's. Bob Chase remembers the training camp in St. Paul when he heard, "Wait till you see the kid I got here, raw

power. Today he flat skated two people.” He did not make a big first impression, however. Braumberger had played with him in Melville, Saskatchewan, and never noticed him. Chase says that Fergie got a bad start here because he was insecure and wanted to do well, so he put a lot of pressure on himself. “I was sure he wouldn’t make it,” says Con.

Up to Christmas, he figured little in the game reports. Polinuk says, “Ferguson was always looking for the goalie. He thought he should always knock the goalie down. He asked me why he wasn’t scoring, so I told him, ‘Leave the goalie alone. Get out fifteen feet or so, and they’ll feed you the puck. He did and he took off. He was big and thought he only needed to charge up and down. He needed more finesse and he got it.” Ulliyot took Ferguson aside for a little advice, to start fighting. Con did too: “I said to him, ‘Do I have to do everything or what?’ The next shift he went and knocked a guy out at first poke.”

He also started scoring. By the end of December, the papers were noticing him. By mid-January they thought he was a candidate for Rookie of the Year. He finished the season with 32 goals and 65 points. Zanier says, “A couple of times they were going to let him go, then he’d score and they wouldn’t.”

Because of his later career, Fergie is more famous for fighting than scoring. “His hands were so big,” said Gus, “Don’t let him get hold of you.” Chase reported, “Fergie would say humbly, ‘When I hit people, they bleed.’” The opposing players noticed. Chuck Adamson of the Indianapolis Chiefs said, “He was so intense on the ice, he’d kill you,” and recounted that if he stopped a Ferguson shot, John would then rifle one at his head. “If he lost the first fight, he’d say, ‘See you in the second period.’” Moe Bartoli of Louisville agreed, “He scared everybody.”

McCusker remembered a game in Toledo when “Con started something. Fergie joined in blindly hitting guys. Ron Hemmerling was shouting, ‘Fergie, Fergie, it’s your old buddy, leave me alone.’” McCusker also told the story of Fergie’s thumb: “We were playing Louisville and Grant Morton started fighting Con in front of the net. Morton was beating him. We were on the bench and Ken sent Fergie in. He started as hard as he could, he gave Morton an overhead right to the head and broke his thumb. Knocked Morton out, a concussion. His thumb was never the same.”

Dr. Priddy said, “He’d have to be three-fourths dead before we saw him. He hated stitches and we didn’t give him any.”

There were other sides to Fergie, however, a fun side and a practical side.

The K's were between games in Minneapolis, and Lionel Repka and John went to a department store. They went up an escalator to the sporting goods department. There was a mannequin with an Indian outfit on, and Fergie put on the headdress.

Fergie liked to pretend to be clumsy and knock things over. He would drive into a gas station and open his door, knocking over a display of oil cans. There was a box of ping pong balls in the store. Fergie stumbled and sent the boxful flying all over, including toward the escalator. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he said, pretending to stoop down to gather them up but actually kicking them farther away until some of them went bouncing down the escalator. Lionel ran before the store authorities could show up.

Dick Zimmerman was working with midget hockey. One day there was a boy in tears because he didn't get to play. John Ferguson was helping coach and he said that when he was growing up, there was a two minute rule. Someone would sound a bell and all the players had to change. Zimmerman said at first they worried that someone would put his best players out against our worst ones, but then realized that we could do the same if that happened, so they tried it. It worked and it stayed the rule.

Ullyot pointed out Ferguson's potential to the New York Rangers, but they said no, so he went to the Cleveland Barons of the AHL for three years before spending eight seasons with the Montreal Canadiens. He was their leading fighter. "There are levels of fighters," said McCusker, "He was the heavyweight champ of the NHL." Ullyot and Long echoed one another in saying, "He made a difference here."

Len Ronson, who had to try out for the Canadiens against Fergie, said that although Fergie started slow in Fort Wayne, "All of a sudden it was there when he went to Cleveland. Then he went to Montreal, and he belonged there."

The Longest Game

The longest game in the history of the Komets was played in the Coliseum on 14 April 1960 against the St. Paul Saints. It was the fourth game of the finals for that season.

The game lasted 118:29 minutes. As the overtimes piled up, the players got more tired and the frustration grew.

The worst moment for the Komets was the penalty shot. Con Madigan was at the blue line, captured the puck and looked around, but no one was there. "I poked it and headed for the net," he said. Saints bad-boy John Bailey threw his stick at Con. Con took a shot, which hit the corner of the net, and then he crashed into the boards. He was badly shaken up.

McCusker says, "Con and I broke in on Ramsay with no one in front of us. Glenn came out to cut off the angle to Con. I regret not yelling for the puck I'd have had an open net. Con was unselfish, he'd have given it to me."

"I think that now, a thrown stick means an automatic goal," said Con.

A penalty shot was awarded. The team could choose which player would take the shot. Glenn Ramsay told Fred Shero at the Saints' bench that if Ulliyot chose Len Ronson, he could beat him. If he chose Thornson, he couldn't. "Ronson practiced against me a lot when I was a Komet," Ramsay explains, "He was a shooter, he had one move. Thornson could always score on me, he had variations. You never knew what he was going to do."

Ulliyot chose Ronson, who was the big scorer that year. Chase said, "He hit a rough spot in the ice. The puck began to bounce and by the time he got it organized, Ramsay was all over him." McCusker commented, "Ronson had a howitzer of a shot, but he wasn't the kind to deke the goalie." Both he and Zanier suggest that Maxfield should have taken the shot, and Bob said, "He could always beat the goalie when we were having fun." Con agreed, "It should have been Len Thornson or Maxie. He was a dippy-doodler, he could put that puck up."

Ronson himself says he hoped Ken would choose Eddie to make the shot. "He was better one-on-one. Everybody was giving me advice. I decided to send one in about two inches off the ice on his stick side. He got his toe on it and sent it into the corner. It was a great save—that was Ramsay. But a kick in the teeth for me."

With the game tied 3-3, Long scored at 15:46 of the third period. It seemed to be over, and then Aggie Kukulowicz managed to get one past Zanier, creating the overtime. As time mounted, Aggie lamented to goal judge Dick Zimmerman, "I wish I'd never scored that damned goal."

The players had gone into the game tired. "We'd played three games in three days, we were out of gas," says McCusker. "In those days of twelve-man teams, you played all the time."

As time went on, people began leaving. It was the Harvester employees going to start the third shift. Then about midnight, the arena began filling up again. It was the second shift people from Harvester coming in! They'd been following Bob Chase on the radio.

When asked how his voice held up, Chase said, "I had a good leather briefcase. I'd carry four beers in it and they stayed cold for the game. I'd had the beers and I couldn't trust the water out there, so I asked George Drysdale, my color man, to go to the press room to get a beer. He brings a 7-Up. It was better than nothing, so I downed it. It was straight booze, a practical joke by Jimmy Stovall from the construction company. It took my voice away, I had tears coming. It kept me going till 1:20 a.m., but I wouldn't advocate it regularly for play-by-play."

Thornson remembered, "We outplayed them so bad. Ramsay, I outplayed him and hit the post, the puck came out to Ronson and he hit the post too. The ice was soft. I knew all those guys, I'd played with them in Winnipeg and Shawinigan, that made it worse."

Finally at 8:39 of the fourth overtime, Elliot Chorley scored. Repka said, "Rupp and I were on the ice. Chorley shot and it hit somebody's stick, went into the air. Reno was looking for it, his eyes were going, but it hit him on the head and went in. It was flukey." Chorley also called it a fluke.

Ramsay made 72 saves that night, and Zanier 57. Ramsay called it 'the greatest hockey game I was ever a part of.'

The players staggered home. Repka remembered, "Afterwards we'd usually have a couple of beers. After that game I was sitting at the table with a beer and I was too tired to pick it up."

Building to Glory

After the success of the previous season, 1960-61 saw the departure of Ronson, McCusker, Ferguson, Rupp and Hart to other teams, and Stone retired. Milne played only six games with the K's this season. After the new team emerged, the newspaper referred to 'Ulliyot's rookie-studded team' which was only partly true. He had four rookies (Jim Baird, Ron Baryluk, Sid Garant and Dunc McCallum), but he had drafted Joe Kastelic when the Louisville Rebels folded and obtained Jean Therrien from the Milwaukee Falcons. When the Falcons also folded in

November 1960, he drafted Reg Primeau from them. These three veterans were important acquisitions, and of the six players who scored more than sixty points for the Komets that year, two were rookies (Baird and Baryluk). "We had some good kids that year," said Zanier, "But guys kept coming and going while they tried to find the right combination."

The IHL was divided into East and West, and the West dominated. All three western teams, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha, had more points than any in the east. The Komets came second in the east (fifth overall) with 65 and a record of 31-35-3, quite a difference to the previous year. "It was a tough league," said Dave Richardson, "The IHL and AHL were like the NHL in those days, the WHL was a busman's league in comparison." Fort Wayne had a certain stature in the IHL also by now, because of its fans and success. "Fort Wayne was the place that sold out," said Moe Bartoli, who was then starring with the Minneapolis Millers, "The stands were always full."

With two years in the IHL behind him, Ulliyot was one of the most influential people in the league. He had confidence in his players, too; they knew what to do. "I'd open the gate with those guys, that's all I needed to do. They didn't need anything more. We had eight or nine teams like that in the sixties. In practice, I was in charge, that's what they needed."

The sudden loss of Denver the previous season had been solved when the team moved to Minneapolis. Milwaukee lasted only a few weeks into 1960-61. Louisville was gone too. There had to be teams to play if the league was to survive.

Among the sponsors of the team at this time was the Hobby Ranch House, home of Kentucky Fried Chicken, whose sponsorship lasted many years. The players had been photographed with Dave Thomas (later of Wendy's) who presented them with chicken, and then they ate it in the stands, duly finding it finger-licking good for the camera. Colonel Sanders himself once came to drop the puck at a game. In the 70s, the ads would say, "Kentucky Fried Chicken and Fort Wayne Komets, then and now, both still hard to beat!"

Ads in the programs showed Thomson with 7-Up and the slogan "Komets drink 7-up after every game," and Joe Kastelic drinking a glass of milk from Dairymen's.

Len Thomson's reign as scoring champ, MVP and all-star pick had now begun. He was the only Komet all-star in 1960-61.

The team made some films around this time, with instructional shots, Ken explaining and a player demonstrating some moves, followed by a game. These were meant for programs at local clubs, to stir up interest in the sport. The players would also do public appearances and speaking.

The limits on personnel occasionally caused difficulties. Lionel Repka tells of one solution: "Back then we could only have one goalie. The trainer would stand in for him sometimes but if we needed two goalies for games in practice, we were short. Sometimes a guy would stand there but it didn't really work because you were afraid to shoot hard in case you hurt him. So we had Woody.

"Woody was a piece of plywood with the corners cut out and a little hole in the middle at the bottom. You could practice aiming at the holes and just shooting at Woody. We'd talk about Woody and shooting at Woody." Some players still refer to Woody as if he'd been a member of the team. The trainer, George Polinuk, was pressed into service for one game this season to act as goalie.

The top scorers of the 1961-62 season were Thornson, Primeau, Long, rookie Dave Richardson and Baryluk. Richardson was the IHL Rookie of the Year. Primeau said he was 'feisty but little,' and Chase said, "He could stir things up more than ten guys and then slip out from under it." Ulyot summed up, "He played well for us and it was not a surprise he was chosen rookie of the year. He'd skate like the wind but wouldn't keep his stick on the ice."

Muskegon topped the league, but the western teams were still powerful. Richardson enjoyed playing in St. Paul, "I knew a lot of Winnipegers there and my friends came from Winnipeg to watch." He had chosen to come here despite an offer from the WHL because of the chance to play, "You're only twenty, and all you really want is to play. We played well all the time, we were always ready." He characterized the IHL as 'the ideal league for what it was supposed to be.'

As a starry rookie, Dave quickly learned about playing in the pros. "This big French guy from Muskegon, a monster, he told me he was going to 'hammer the hell out of me.' Gary Young told me not to worry. I was little, but Young and Bert Aikens, they were always there."

Moose Lallo's Muskegon team was plenty tough. John Goodwin, who joined the Komets that year, said he went into a corner during a Muskegon game, and found himself unconscious in the dressing room

with a cut head and broken ribs. No penalties were called as a result of the incident.

Dave observed, "We were the only team in the league that had four defensemen, everyone else had three." In these years, the lines were not as rigid either. Goodwin said, "Roger Maisonneuve and I were the two left wingers, we got lots of ice time. I played right wing sometimes."

Two of the new defensemen were Gary Young and Emil Gilles. "Gary was good at blocking shots, also Emil," said Goodwin, "And later Nellie [Bulloch] and Ivan [Prediger]." Young and Gilles had both played in Flin Flon, "and they were both blind," according to Goodwin, "They'd ask how much time is left because they couldn't see the clock." They saw well enough to block the shots, however. Young later spent three years with Eddie Shore's Springfield Indians.

In 1961-62, Ulliot left coaching to manage the team fulltime. He brought Art Stone back as coach. "Art was strict," said Goodwin, "A good communicator but quiet. Ken was more vocal."

Dave Richardson learned that he had been chosen Rookie of the Year from a reporter in Winnipeg. "I was flabbergasted. You never consider such a thing. I felt better about it later, but I wish we'd got in the playoffs." A few years later he was invited back to be player-coach, but he declined. He is glad to have played in Fort Wayne, however: "For me to go there in my first year, it meant more than the award."

The Oldest Rookie

Con Madigan's two seasons with the Komets (1959-1961) are well-remembered by all who saw him play.

Con was born in Port Arthur, Ontario and played in British Columbia. His early seasons with the Penticton Vees were formative. He played there with the Warwick brothers—Billy, Grant and Dick—two of them at the end of NHL careers.

"I learned to be a tough guy from them. They said you get respect and more room to move around that way. Billy also told me, 'You gotta work, you got a long way to go.' I knew that. A reporter on a paper at home, Bill Guy, told me when I was about sixteen that I'd never make pro. There were a lot of great players in the Lakehead then, and he thought I didn't measure up. I wanted to show him."

Cy Whiteside knew Con in those days. "We knew what kind of guy he was. One guy on our team tied his jersey down so Con couldn't pull it over his head. Con was a hard rock."

Ken Ullyot knew the Warwicks and one day he phoned Con inviting him to training camp. He was bringing in a Saskatoon native at the same time, Andy Voykin. From the beginning they were a team.

"It was a tough training camp, Ken didn't know what to make of me, I like to hit," said Con. This was to be his claim to fame: he was a fighter and he was tough. "You could hit Con ten times in the head and he'd take it," said Bob McCusker. "He was one of the toughest we've ever had, remember those fights with Cy Whiteside and Bob Bailey," says Colin Lister. "He played hard, he even speared me and fought in practice," said Reggie Primeau. "He'd ask players on other teams, 'What color eye do you want today?' to psych them out." Chuck Adamson remembers a practice in Minneapolis during 1962-63, when Con had gone to the WHL but was visiting with the Komets. He played with them, blocking shots in street clothes with only gloves to protect him.

In late November 1959, he set off a brawl at the end of a period which ended with every player on both teams on the ice. Con jumped from the penalty box to go after one of the Louisville Rebels. Con, Fergie and the Rebels' Grant Morton all drew misconducts.

On 7 January 1961 Con earned four minors and two misconducts in one game against Muskegon. He and Moose Lallo 'engaged in a little bit of conversation' and Con's second misconduct was for an obscene gesture as they were thrown out of the game. Otherwise the K's did well in this game, with Jim Baird gaining six points and Len Thomson a hat trick.

His best remembered opponent is Cy Whiteside, who had roomed with Bob McCusker at Colorado College. "He was quiet and soft spoken, but you never knew what he would do, he'd cut your ear off," said Bob. "So people would say, 'I'm not going to hurt one of his guys, he'll be back for retribution.' Some guys who are timid can be brave when playing with a guy like that." Con fought with Cy before a game (both were thrown out) and another time at center ice. Ullyot remembers the pregame fight as the best he's ever seen. Cy later made an important contribution to the Komets' 1965 Turner Cup win.

He remembers a fight with Con in 1959-60. "Bruce Lea had John Ferguson in a headlock. Then I picked a fight with Con. Con asked Ken what to do. I knocked him down and Con came up swinging, clocked me in the mouth. We fought till we got tired. I was quite a scrapper." He explained, "Con was an intimidator. It was my job to prevent that."

Once he was going, Con was hard to stop. "He got so reckless he forgot what he was doing," was Eddie Long's assessment. Dr. Priddy said he would try to talk to Con after a fight, but he couldn't talk, you had to let him calm down first. A teammate said, "The only person who could get to him was Andy. He could control him." George Polinuk remembers an occasion when Voykin told Con he'd got a stupid penalty. "You screwed everybody up, you're screwing me, too."

His fearlessness worked for the team. It was Con that Ken would send on the ice to fight. Moe Bartoli said, "Madigan looked like the devil and Ken knew it, too." Bob agreed, "When he was on the ice, everyone was watching what he'd do."

Off the ice, Con joked, and was the proverbial kind and quiet guy. He also added a dimension to the bench and dressing room. The *News-Sentinel* of 2 January 1960 quotes Eddie on Con: "He's a rugged defenseman on the ice and he's a real holler guy on the bench and in the dressing room. We've never had a guy like that before." Gerry Sillers, who played with Con in Portland said he had a real influence there. Asked about this, Con said, "Maybe we needed a pick-me-up. Maybe it wasn't going well. I'd say, 'Let's do something. Let's not stand still. Let's get going.'" Bob Reed referred to Con as 'a cheerleader.'

The players' favorite memory of Con took place in the dressing room after a losing game. Ken blasted the players. Con was sure it was because some of the players had been golfing earlier. The premier golfer on the team was Bob McCusker, and Con ripped Bob's underwear right off him. Bob says now, "It tore easily because George [Polinuk] had washed it 88 times. Con had to blame someone. Andy Voykin had played golf too, but he didn't tear his underwear."

Con could score as well as hit. When he did, he might perform a little dance, skating backwards, a 'war dance' as he calls it. He had learned the dance from Billy Warwick. One night he wanted to do the dance, so he asked to be fed the puck. He was, and he did score, so he did the dance, but as he went backward he fell on his butt. Bud Gallmeier enjoyed it so much he mentioned it in his column the next day.

When he was going to fight, he might discard more than gloves and stick—his jersey came off sometimes, too. Hilliard Gates commented, "I'm supposed to be doing a sporting event, not a strip tease."

Con continued to play until 1975, when he was 41, for various AHL and WHL teams, but mostly for the Portland Buckaroos. In 1972 he

amazed everyone by becoming the oldest man ever to play a rookie season in the NHL at 38.

Con was told he was being traded to Denver. He said he didn't want to go to Denver and would retire. Lynn Patrick phoned him from St. Louis and asked him to go to Denver as player-coach, "Then we'll bring you to St. Louis." Con said, "I want to go to St. Louis now." Patrick agreed to give him a ten day tryout. At the fifth day, they said they would sign him. They promised him a Cadillac if they made third place, and he got it. He found NHL play different, with less hitting, although they did tell him, 'if you get a chance, rock 'em.'

Con was later named all-time Best Defenseman of the WHL.

Ken summed up Con by saying, "His color came from the desire to win. Even in the easiest game he was the boss in the dressing room. You had to keep him light hearted because you'd never know who he would get angry at. You couldn't get a better team player if you had the blueprints." He finished with, "He kept his stick on the ice," praise which Con understands, because it's the same thing he said himself about Eddie Long.

On the Road

Ken Ullyot says you cannot understand what it's like to play hockey unless you know what it's like on the road. In the early days, the players travelled by car in small groups. They later changed to a bus and later still they flew the long distances to Salt Lake City and Orlando.

They would drive four or five in a car, not always the same guys together. McNeil remembered three white station wagons, but Dave Richardson rode in Colin Lister's Buick. "I got to drive it too," he said. Spending those hours in the car drew the players together. On short hops, to Indianapolis for instance, the players might drive themselves or even ride with fans who were coming to the games.

An advantage to going by car was that individual vehicles could take their own route and stop where they wanted. "We might want brats and a beer after the game," said Waslawski. Even when they got back at two or three in the morning, there would still be practice at 10. Polinuk points out a remarkable record: there were no accidents. That might seem more unusual considering that the players might save time by drinking their post-game beers in the car.

Stanutz tells about returning from Cincie during the 1954-55 season. He, George Ouellette, Paul Saindon and Bill Richardson were in

the station wagon. They stopped to get a case of beer for the trip. Back on the road, Ouellette saw a flashing light behind them. "It's the cops!" he shouted and threw the beer out the window. What a disappointment it was to find it was just a volunteer fireman.

During the time that Troy was in the league, a couple of the cars got lost. The K's had only five guys to put on the ice. "We got bombed," says Long. George Drysdale laughs, "The other two cars went to Dayton and they weren't even in the league."

Once on the way to Grand Rapids, Edgar Blondin stopped the car to mark a tree by the roadside. On the way back to Fort Wayne, he stopped again, cut it down and strapped it to the car. He had found his Christmas tree.

After a game in Louisville, one carload of players headed for Indianapolis. The K's had picked up Garth Hayes for the game and had to deliver him back to Indy. [Hayes later played for the Komets in 1960-61.] They met a blizzard and were soon stuck, so they decided to walk. They were wearing their travelling suits, so they put their hockey socks over their dress shoes to wade through the snow and set off. Someone noticed that Colin Lister was carrying a bag. When they asked him what it was, he said it was the box office takings from the game.

The walking was difficult and suddenly Colin was lying in the snow. He was exhausted and said, "Leave me, leave me." Andy Voykin replied, "Okay, but give us the bag."

The others carried Colin partway and then he could walk again. They eventually reached a service station restaurant where they spent the night on the floor, returning to the car after the snowplows had been through in the morning. They continued to Indy, where Colin promised everyone a steak and the best hotel in town.

The team switched to a bus in 1957-58, but went back to autos for a couple of years when Ulliyot came. In the early 1960s, the bus became usual. Joe Kastelic observed, "When you go by bus, you couldn't stop for a beer after the game, especially when you lost."

Ken Ulliyot saw a bus at a school game during the 1960-61 season and approached the driver. Jack Loser agreed to drive the K's, starting an association which continued until 1998. Boyce said, "Jack Loser has been through everything under the sun." He drove himself mostly, but his brother Jim was also behind the wheel. Jack was a fixture, sitting behind the bench with the doctors and eating with the coach and Chase.

The longest trips were to Minneapolis-St. Paul; in the 1960s it took 14-15 hours. Len Thomson described the schedule in the 60s as Omaha or Des Moines on Tuesday, Minneapolis on Wednesday, St. Paul Thursday, Minneapolis again on Friday, St Paul Saturday, Omaha Sunday and then home. They returned the same night from games in Port Huron, Muskegon, Dayton and Toledo.

The players were expected to dress formally for the trips, in suits and ties. Sometimes they had team blazers to wear. In the 90s, they would travel in sweats and change into the ties to walk from the bus to the dressing room.

The bus was an old one, bought used. At first, the bus had no rest room. This was a disadvantage. "I wasn't going to stop for all those guys," says Jack, so the guys would simply stand in the stairwell. Jack would open the door a little as they drove along the road and that would be that. Jack laughs about a player who had 'stage fright' worrying about other cars going by at the time. Gregg Pilling commented, "I've heard that story every team I played on," so the K's were not the only team who saved time this way.

The trips could be monotonous. Both Ted Wright and Cal Purinton remember driving the bus so that Jack could get some rest, and Chase would talk to him to help him keep awake. The players had their favorite seats, and the rookies would have to double up or go to the back. Colin Chin preferred the back seat (which was three across). "He had it for a lot of years," says Loser. "A little guy like him could stretch out."

The players passed the time as best they could. Some would sleep. Some would read or do crossword puzzles. Scott Gruhl loved crosswords and Brent Gretzky says there were 8 or 9 guys, 'the crossword team of the century.'

A favored pastime was cards. They would play bridge, euchre, snarples, hearts, bourré, poker. There might be a game at the front and a different game at the back. Kotsopoulos remembers Baldwin, Hilworth, Burton, Motz and Chase playing poker, or Baldwin and Mike Clarke playing cribbage before the game. "It was my second job, my second income," says George. "I loved playing cards with guys who didn't play cards."

Ian Boyce said that Chin, Lax and Gruhl would play poker, euchre—"whatever Chinner could dream up where he'd make money." Ted Wright and Norm Waslawski would enter the games at the end, when the pots were big. "We'd win a lot of money," says Norm. "We'd

lose money like you wouldn't believe," said John Bloom. "Guys would lose their lunch money." "The same guys always lost," says Thomson, "But Fergie won." Losing money was fine, according to Bloom, because 'that's how you know you have a team.' Pilling said their hearts games were for penny-a-point, and 'you always knew when Chase had a good hand or the queen.'

It seemed to be the rookies who would lose their money, although once Purinton lost his lunch money and Irons was so disgusted he threw the cards out the window. Somebody had a fresh deck so they started again. Doug Johnston said someone would suggest there had been cheating and demand the cards be counted. "There were always cards missing," he says. The big winners in his day were McDougall and Norris, and once again, the rookies lost.

Lionel Repka liked to sleep, but he once woke up in time to join a game at Columbia City. By the time the bus reached Fort Wayne, he announced he'd mastered the finer points of bridge.

There was no drinking or smoking on the bus. If the players carried beer on, they were liable to be fined. Later, it was more acceptable. An alternative was Pepsi. The bottler supplied three or four cases in exchange for an advertisement. It was kept in a drum with ice by the front door. Bottled water is a modern addition.

The meal money for the trips was handed to the players as they got on the bus. While some players might lose it, others were careful. It was as low as \$3.50 in the 50s. The players wanted a dollar boost, so they convinced Eddie to be their spokesman—he was young and a high scorer. He approached Ernie Berg about it and then sat on the bench for five games. The rate went up to \$5-\$6 a decade later and then \$20. In the 50s, players might stick to coneys at a dime apiece. George Drysdale says they often visited the same place which had a salad buffet that went with everything. "We'd have a huge salad and then order a grilled cheese sandwich at fifteen cents," he laughed, "Eventually the owner caught on and was waiting for us the next time we came in."

For short trips the players brought their lunch, either made at home or picked up at a diner on the way to the bus. "He offered us fifty cents or bring your own," said Len, "So we voted to bring our own."

A good place to stop was Merrillville. Once when Jack was still eating but Kotsy had finished, he took the bus for a spin. Jack was furious. Another time as they pulled back out on the interstate a semi cut the bus off. Wayne Bishop said, "Hey, let's moon him," so they all did.

"The road trips bonded the team," said Jack. "It developed camaraderie when they had a good time off the ice together. Later, when the long trips ceased, you could see the changes. Now the long trips are back and it's better." During the 70s, the league was concentrated in the Indiana-Ohio-Michigan area and there were few overnight trips. This was cheaper for the management. Road trips could be very expensive—Loser says the bus was usually about \$2000 a time—but when the league expanded in the 80s, it was too far. Ullyot advised them to keep it a bus league, that anything within 250 miles was economical. The league decided otherwise.

The long trips to Salt Lake lasted four days, with two games. "You wanted to be a .500 team on the road," said Kelly Hurd, "So you hoped you'd win the first one, there was so much to do in Salt Lake." Rigler agreed, "It was like a mini-vacation, but we weren't allowed to ski. If they caught us skiing, they'd tear up our contracts." On the other hand, John Baldassari remembers going to Wendover, Nevada, the nearest casino to Salt Lake.

Riding the bus was tiring and the players needed some time to get their legs back, so they usually tried to arrive 2-3 hours early. That gave time for everyone to prepare, mentally as well as physically.

Some teams flew as early as the sixties. Ted Wright remembers playing in Des Moines, leaving after the game and stopping in Davenport about 1.30. The K's were up again at 7 and arrived in Fort Wayne at 2, in time for a 4 o'clock game. The Oak Leafs flew from Des Moines and arrived much fresher for the game. (Ted says the K's still beat them.)

During the Turner Cup finals in 1963, Nelson Bulloch was left behind at a rest stop. He flagged down a motorist, who took off after the bus—it was only as they were catching up that the others noticed Nellie was missing.

Staying in hotels can be fun, but the coaches usually insisted on a curfew and bed check. Both Ullyots were very firm about this, as was Marc Boileau. "It was usually midnight," says Jack. "In Des Moines Marc would have a room where he could see outside and he'd fine late arrivals." Several players from the mid-sixties tell about an incident where guys stayed out late and coach Eddie Long sat up in the hotel lobby waiting for them. Each player has a different version of the outcome—with himself as the hero! Sometimes it was difficult to observe the curfew because players had fans or a girlfriend in the city, or there might be distractions. Kotsy says that he once put pillows in his

place, hoping that Moose Lallo wouldn't check. He usually didn't. Kotsy explained, "There were figure skaters in Port Huron at the time."

Some players were standing in front of the hotel in Des Moines wearing their blazers with the K's logo on them, and a car pulled up, a woman got out and handed her keys to Reggie. So he went off and parked it for her and got a nice tip. The next one that came in, Eddie thought he'd get a tip too, so he parked it, but the guy stiffed him.

Hotels were different in the fifties. The only amenity was a radio which had to be fed with quarters to work. Orrin Gould always made a point of fishing the quarters out with a coat hanger and dividing them up with his roommates.

The players usually roomed with the same teammate on the road, but the room assignments were made by the coach. Kotsy was billeted with Gary DeLonge, "I think Moose wanted to put two devils together."

One of the pleasures of hotel life was that there was plenty of time for jokes. There would be buckets of water, hiding bedding or short-sheeting beds. On the bus a rookie at the back could be tied by shoelaces to the toilet. "On the way to Salt Lake," said Rigler, "It was important never to fall asleep or take your shoes off. They'd steal your shoes, set the laces on fire."

It happened to him. "I did fall asleep once, when I woke up my shoes were gone. I had to walk through the airport in my socks. Then the last thing on the luggage carousel was my shoes. But I knew who did it [Jim Burton, Craig Channell, Randy Gilhen] so I went to their hotel room and rearranged the furniture. I put their bed in the shower.

"They retaliated by taking my mattress and putting it on the balcony of the room next door, which wasn't a Komets room. It was nine floors up! Somebody had to crawl across and get it." Rigler complains that he and Wally Schreiber always seemed to be blamed for these incidents, even if they were innocent. He then says that they did things so often, they referred to themselves as The Secret Squirrels, because no one knew what they were up to.

There was a lot of activity involving shaving cream. Sleeping players would have it put in their hands. Chase says that at team dinners someone was always crawling under the table putting it on shoes. And road trips were the time for rookies to be initiated, which meant using shaving cream for its intended purpose: shaving. "But not their chin," one player said.

The master of this activity was Lionel Repka. He would knock on the door and say he had a new wrestling hold he wanted to demonstrate. The unsuspecting new boy would invite him in, and once Lionel had him pinned, he'd call in the others to do the dirty work.

Vic DiMarco once encountered a cart full of food in a Milwaukee hotel. He wheeled it away, offering the contents to the other players. When it was empty, he sent it down to the lobby in the elevator. "Berg probably got charged for it," laughs George Drysdale.

While they were away the guys stuck together. "We figured if we stayed together, ate together," said Drysdale, "We wouldn't have trouble with booze and women." Some coaches kept a distance from the players, eating separately, but later even they joined the crowd. "It's a way of building team spirit," says Joe Franke, "You eat and drink as a group." He cites the nineties coaches Sims, Boudreau and Allison as following this form, while Torchetti and Sonier were more separate.

When you mention the road trips, the players grin. They were fun and "the weeklong trips were more fun," said Chase and another says. "That's where all the action was." That's what they remember. But Todd Strueby says, "Travel is not as appealing as people think. They think it's romantic. You're working, it's a job and if you're thinking about other things you're not as focused as you should be. Everything revolves around the games."

There is a different psychology operating when you play on the road, too. "A lot of guys are more gutsy in their own building," explained Purinton. Pembroke agreed, "There are two different teams, one on the road and one at home. In 1972-73 we had a nucleus of players who did better on the road. Winning means more on the road."

Terry also spoke of the ailment that affects some players when the road game is in a particular city. In his day it was the Des Moines or Dayton flu; at other times it was the Toledo flu. Some players found that the tough players and tough crowds in another town were too much.

"You know what it's like," Terry said, "Somebody like Prediger would growl at you as if you didn't exist." Once people got to know Pembroke, it isn't likely anybody was doing much growling except him.

Choo-Choo

Because his first name connected with Lionel brand model trains, Coliseum organist Norm Carroll would play "Chattanooga Choo-

Choo” when Lionel Repka skated up the ice. It was natural he should be called ‘Choo-Choo.’

Lionel was born in Edmonton, Alberta and played in the WHL before coming to Fort Wayne. He had tried out in Detroit, but ‘I couldn’t bust into that lineup.’ He spent eleven seasons with the Komets, 1958-69. When he had to return home suddenly after only a few games here in 1959, Ken Ullyot told him there was a job waiting for him if he wanted to return. When he prematurely retired in 1966 and then changed his mind, he found the same answer, an indication of how much he was valued on the team.

As a defenseman Repka had shown his worth playing with Duane Rupp in the 1959-60 season, and that was true throughout the 60s. The Journal Gazette summed him up saying, “One of the reasons why the Komets have the best defense record in the IHL is Lionel Repka, who is doing a great job breaking up plays near his own goal and getting the puck started the other way.”

He became a defenseman because ‘I was a good puckhandler for a defenseman, they put me on defense to fill in and it worked out.’ Asked whom he admires, he names Red Kelly, Doug Harvey and Bobby Orr. “Orr rushed the puck,” he says, “And such a skater—he had four over-drives.”

Other players emphasize Lionel’s quickness and strength. “He was steady, always in a good position,” said John Goodwin, “And he always had a story to tell you.” George Polinuk was unsure of his quickness at first: “Ullyot was timing the defensemen when Lionel was first here. I told him I’d let him have a start otherwise Ken would chase him out of town. He turned out to be one of the best defensemen in the league.”

Although he is mild mannered, everyone remembers Lionel the fighter. “Lionel didn’t get into fights,” said Chuck Adamson, “But when he did he was like a windmill.” “He sure could hit,” agreed Moe Bartoli, who was on another team at the time. Ted Wright says, “He was quick, piston-like. I remember once he hit a guy ten times and the guy said, ‘I didn’t know you were left handed,’ and Lionel replied, ‘I’m not. My right hand was sore that day.’”

Asked about an enforcer, John Bloom said, “I never saw Lionel get his ass kicked. He could protect. Galipeau could too, but he wouldn’t fight.” Bobby Rivard agreed, “I would tell Lionel to go get them and he would, if they were bigger than me.”

Lionel talked about the art of passing: "Good passes are important. A drop pass with a tail is not good, it ends up aiming for your feet. What you need is a drop pass that comes in ahead of you and stops. It should be still so you can come in and shoot it. On the other hand, sometimes you want one with a tail. It's the speed that matters. It should float back. A frisbee pass goes up in the air, but when it lands, it's flat on the ice. There's no wobbling, landing on the edge. You have to throw it in the hole; put the puck where the guy is going. Len Thornson was masterful at passing. And Primeau."

He also spoke about the chemistry a team has: "Chemistry starts right away with some, others never. You need to practice five or six times, you get to know one another, you play a few games and you can tell if you play with a guy. Sometimes it seems okay in practice, but it dies on the road, there's no understanding. Other times you learn his favorite moves and style of skating, and it works."

Once when Lionel was negotiating his contract with Ken Ullyot, they were stuck, \$6.50 away from a settlement. Ken suggested flipping a coin, but as he did so, Lionel reached out and caught it. He was also an early wearer of contact lenses. During a game in December 1959, he lost one and had to play 'with one eye.'

In the spring of 2001, Lionel had an experience with a Komets fan which illustrates the power of the team, the fame of Bob Chase and the importance of the work the K's did with children. Randy Dannenfelser, who lived on Long Island in 1962, wrote to him: "You were my favorite player in the I, Mr Repka. We were both defensemen, maybe that's why. And to hear Bob Chase describe it, you just seemed so good at it. As a thirteen-year-old, I just associated everything I did on the ice with you, and I never even saw you play a game. One day, I decided to write you a fan letter. I didn't know what to say besides the usual kid stuff, but I thought I'd have to ask you some sort of question to get a reply, so I asked you what uniform number you wore. And I think I asked you for an autographed photo. About two weeks later, I came home from school to find a large manila envelope on the kitchen table with "L. Repka" written in the return address and "Photo—do not bend" written across the envelope. I don't know if you have any idea how excited a thirteen-year-old kid gets when he holds an envelope from his favorite player, but it is a feeling all kids should be able to experience at least once. Inside was the glossy photo you signed to me, with a brief handwritten letter on Komets stationery. You thanked me for my letter

and told me you wore number six. The next day, I changed my jersey number from two to six (my aunt ripped the old felt number 2 off and sewed a new number 6 in its place), and it was my number until I reached high school. I'm in my fifties now. I just want to thank you very, very much for making a thirteen-year-old feel very special."

The Best There Was

Len Thomson shone from his days in juvenile hockey in Winnipeg. "Ab McDonald, Leo Konyk and Len were the big stars in the juvenile league in Winnipeg," remembered fellow Manitoban George Polinuk, "Len was so good with the puck." This is confirmed by Dave Richardson, who was reassured when he heard he was coming to Fort Wayne because Len Thomson was here, and "the name of Len Thomson was something. I was confident." He went on to describe Len as 'ahead of his time, a complete player, that's why he had such a career.'

In his twelve seasons with the K's, Len was always at or near the top of the scoring and had seven seasons with more than 100 points. He won the James Gatschene (MVP) trophy six times and the Leo Lamoureux trophy as top scorer three times.

This only tells part of the story, however. Not only did Len score, he did so in the smoothest, finest way. "I called him the Snake," said Ted Wright. "He could slither between guys." "He had this instinct," observed Gus Braumberger, "He was a step ahead of the play. You can't work and get that, it has always to be there. There were only two players who could, Max Bentley¹ and Len. I thought the puck was taped to his stick." Lionel Repka said, "He would tease you by putting the puck out and taking it back." Goalie Gerry Randall remembered, "Len's shot wouldn't break a pane of glass—but it was just inside the line." And George Polinuk: "He had a little dip of the shoulder. You thought he'd shoot and then he'd go the other way." Doug Johnston, seeing Len play in the 90s, said it was 'still magical.'

Above all, he was consistent, a word he likes to use about himself. He is also modest: "Some of the best games had no scoring. Others the puck would bounce off your head and go in. I was very consistent, scoring every year and I was around a long time."

He credits Ken Ullyot with being good at teaching fundamentals. Asked for an example, he used one which may explain his own amazing

¹ Bentley spent ten years with the Blackhawks and Toronto Maple Leafs.

control of the puck. "He said that players who are skating down the ice must keep their eyes up. They can see players ahead of them and with their peripheral vision others coming at them. Usually they can see one but the second one is trouble. Then when they get where they want to take a shot, they look down at the puck.

"Really good players learn to keep track of the puck with their peripheral vision, while looking forward and seeing the other players more directly. You can then shoot without looking down—looking down warns the goalie and also takes your eyes off the other team's players. You need to see and handle the puck at the same time."

His teammates generally agree that he was not the fastest skater. He's not so sure. "I took long strides and was not that slow. Probably I could beat 5 out of the 15 on the team. I make a distinction between milers and sprinters. Milers can keep going over the long distance, while sprinters are fast but not for long. Anyway, sprinters sometimes forget to bring the puck with them." Summing up, he said his greatest skill was in puck handling and compares himself to Larry Bird, who couldn't run and couldn't jump; all he could do was score. "Merv would shoot at 100 miles an hour, and Len Ronson; by the time I'd shot at 19 miles an hour the goalie would have time to wave at it twice before it got there, but it still went in."

As for his deceptiveness, faking both the goalie and the defensemen, he says, "Working together is important. I would lead him to where I wanted to go. I would throw it behind so it could bounce in front of him. There are these little things that work." Longtime opponent Moe Bartoli experienced the 'little things' many times; "He could set you up, he reminded me of Beliveau." Said George Stanutz, "I hated playing against him. He would be coming in real slow, you think he's got nothing. Then he's behind you. He'd put you to sleep." Gerry Randall reported, "I told the guys when I played in Columbus, 'When Len gets to the red line, go straight at him. He'll make you look so bad otherwise.'"

After two early seasons in Shawinigan of the Quebec league, Len played in Indianapolis where he was first paired with Len Ronson. They were overshadowed there by the 'B Line' (Pierre Brillant, Marc Boileau and Bob Bowness). Pete Wywrot was also on the team. The two Lens were once fined for 'indifference' after a game when they had only been on the ice twice. It was a relief when they were traded to Huntington in January 1957 in exchange for George Hayes. When

Huntington folded at the end of the season they moved to Fort Wayne and the glory began for both of them.

Thornson was a perennial at the Montreal training camps, but could never get in. In 1961 he was offered a chance to play for the Montreal Royals, part of the Canadiens' system, but he said no. He found he could make more money in Fort Wayne than at 'the big show' and he had developed a loyalty to the city; his kids were born here. Chuck Adamson remembers being at a Cleveland training camp with him. In eight exhibition games, Len had 18 points and the team beat the Rangers, but management still said, "Lenny, you're too old." Perhaps they should have called in Con Madigan for some advice on older players.

The words 'gentleman' and 'nice guy' come up in any discussion about Len. He was generous to those around him. "Len never failed to make anybody he played with better," said Stanutz, echoing Len Ronson. In 1965-66, Len was on a line with Gerry Sillers and Alton White. "It was tough on him having two rookies on his line," they said, "It hampered him in the scoring race." He was fourth on the team that year, after the three members of the Jet Line.

He wasn't perfect, however. Once when he was driving to Troy with Colin Lister, they each assumed the other knew the way. It was only on the highway that they discovered that neither of them did.

Len likes to remember a game at Columbus on Friday, 13 January 1967. The K's won 7-6 in overtime. Thornson had 4 goals (including the winner) and 3 assists. He says, "I wasn't feeling well at the time." It being Friday the 13th, Columbus management dumped some black cats on the ice and passed out rabbits' feet to the fans. It didn't work too well!

In the 1960-61 season he was leading the scoring when he fell in Toledo and his skate was caught in the boards. He broke his ankle and was out for the remaining games of the season. He still finished third in the scoring. His career ended in 1969 after an accident to his eye caused retinal damage, although he continued to coach and scout for a while.

"He was always too good for this league," said Stanutz. Long remarked, "He was the best all round player, with no fear of getting hit" and Pembroke said, "As good a player I ever saw from the blue line in." In 1993 Len was elected to the Manitoba Sports Hall of Fame and in 1997, *The Hockey News* named him the IHL's all time best player. No one disagreed.

Adamson and Those Sixties Goalies

"We had so many good goalies," said Rob Laird, and John Goodwin commented, "A good goalie's your bread and butter." If that's true, then the Komets made a lot of sandwiches in the sixties.

Of the crowd of netminders from this time, Chuck Adamson stands out as the star, but they are an able crowd. It's a truism that 'goalies are different' which may be because they need special talents and a frame of mind. "On any given night anyone can beat anyone," says Doug Teskey, "I've seen the least talented guys do it. It's in their head." Everyone agrees that psychology is at the center of successful goal-keeping. "Sometimes you're hot in the warmup and fall down in the game, or vice versa," said Gerry Randall. "Some nights you couldn't stop a balloon," agreed Adamson. "You must concentrate," continues Randall, "You can't take your mind off it for a moment, and it's hard when you're just standing there."

He also points out critical moments in the game. "First, the warmup is for the goalie. Did you realize that? And then, the first and the last minute of a game, and the first minute after a goal is the most important time in the momentum of the game."

The goalie has a special relationship with his defensemen too. "I like to wander out of the net, so my defensemen have to develop their own butterfly style," says Teskey, "I do lots of talking with my defensemen, and defensemen talk to the forwards." Coach Art Stone would say to the players: the goalie is the third defenseman.

Observers might think that in a breakaway, the goalie is very vulnerable, but Randall says he has the advantage. "You can see the breakaway clearly. If he has the puck by his ankle and is going to shoot, you can come out. If he's got it in front of him, he's going to shift you, try to skate around. Also you know how he's going to shoot, you can tell by the way he comes off the wing. In a penalty shot, the goalie actually has the upper hand." Knowing where the puck is going to be can be learned, says Bob Chase, "Anticipation of where the puck will be depends on how you are coached."

It was in the sixties that the goalie mask became common. Although Randall was the first goalie to wear a mask, Adamson was the first to do so regularly. "I thought Gerry was crazy not to wear it," says Chuck. Masks were introduced by Jacques Plante of the Montreal Canadiens. Trainer George Polinuk was the K's practice goalie but did not wear a mask. "I was hit a few times," he says.

As the sixties opened, Reno Zanier was in the nets. He was the all-star goalie in 1959-60, with a 2.61 average. "The guys had a lot of faith in him. The guys believed in him. Everything worked that year except the last game." Plus he had four great defensemen in front of him.

Reno started as a goalie at eight in Trail, British Columbia, where he was also a star baseball player. He came to Fort Wayne after being traded to Portland when New Westminster folded. Portland's legendary coach Hal Laycoe was another of Ulliyot's friends. Ken phoned and Reno left for training camp.

"He was cool in the nets, not excitable," said Long. "He was unstoppable up close," said McCusker, indicating Reno's eye problems with distance. Reno himself says that he was taught an old goalie trick, the poke check, by Johnny Bower, and he used it regularly. He says it was useful and easy—"you just slip your stick out"—and wonders why modern goalies don't use it more.

The gash caused by Aggie Kukulowicz's skate, described earlier, has left a permanent scar. "Aggie cut around someone, tripped and ended on his back with his feet up," Reno remembers, "I dove down to poke check and his skate caught me. I lost 2 teeth and 2 were loose. They stitched me up and sent me back to the hotel, but I was bleeding and in pain so I went back to the hospital for two or three days. When I got back to Trail in the summer, a plastic surgeon there said, 'what a mess' so he redid it, recut it and fixed it up." The team doctors, Priddy and Stuckey, sent a letter to IHL officials recommending a plastic guard for the back of the players' skates, which they implemented the following season.

Gallmeier interviewed Reno, who said, "The toughest part about playing goal is playing the angles. Most of the guys in this league will look down at the puck just before they shoot. There are a couple of cute ones, though, who will look one way and shoot the other. Thomson on our team is one. The toughest guys to stop are Pierre Brillant of Indianapolis and Chick Chalmers of Louisville [later of Toledo]."

Goal judge Dick Zimmerman remembers a game against Des Moines when he saw the puck cross the goal crease. On went the light, but Reno turned and had the puck in his hand. Dick turned the light off. The Des Moines players were angry, the referee investigated and declared it no goal. Only years later did Reno tell Dick that the puck had gone in, then bounced out right into his glove!

In retirement, Reno continued to play, including time on the 1963 Canadian national team. He still has an IHL record, 8 shutouts.

Asked to describe his style, Reno says, "I stood up, played the puck off the boards, which was not usual in those days. I learned that from John Sofiak [Trail Smoke Eaters goalie, 1950-53]. Also I was a good skater and used the poke check."

Chuck Adamson had so many glorious moments, it might be difficult to choose just one, but for the fans the night of 20 November 1962 was memorable. The Montreal Canadiens came to town and Adamson made 72 saves.

Adamson belonged to the Canadiens and went to their training camp, but with Jacques Plante on the scene he didn't stand a chance. They had offered him a contract as backup goalie; the backup would practice but would sit out the games. Adamson said he'd rather play. This night he showed them. Plante had a relaxing time, since the K's could hardly get the puck over the red line—he did allow one goal by simply watching it sail past.

The memory Dennis Blume has of the game is of Emil Gilles, a big guy, who seemed to have it in for a Montreal player who was wearing a mask (not Plante). He kept knocking him down and the guy kept getting up. It didn't go any farther, being an exhibition game, but it was more intense than Dennis expected. Gilles cannot remember either the player or the mask. Anybody but a goalie in a mask would be unusual and Gilles suggests, "Maybe he was playing in a charade."

Adamson stood on his head, and Montreal coach Toe Blake said, "If your goalie plays like that all the time, we'll take him with us." Already put out by the contract business, Charlie was annoyed at the implication that he didn't play like that all the time. He had also made 72 saves on 20 March 1962 during a Chiefs-Mercurys game.

Adamson played junior in Peterborough, Ontario, under Scotty Bowman before moving up to the IHL and EHL, notably in Indianapolis. When the Chiefs folded, he and Bob Rivard came to Fort Wayne. They had been in Peterborough together, too. Adamson's time in Indy had been difficult; it wasn't a good team and his defensemen let him down. In the 1959-60 season, he had stopped an average of 48 shots a game.

He had broken his leg during the Indy years, and getting up was difficult. Johnny Bower had given him some good advice. A standup goalie, Bower said that you felt you were never out of position if you were on your feet. He showed Chuck some exercises for balance and agility. The first involved dancing right and left eight inches with your

skates on. In the second, you sat on a chair with your back straight, no feet on the floor and balanced it on its two back legs.

His teammates had a high opinion of Chuck, calling him quick as a cat and underrated. George Stanutz observed, "Whether he was with good teams or bad teams, he was always good. He had no bad nights." John Goodwin, Walt Bradley and John Bloom all suggested that he was even better than Ramsay.

If he had a characteristic that everyone mentions, it is that he vomited before every game, after the warmup. On one occasion he even vomited on the ice, but it was okay, because 'the more he vomited, the better he played.' Opponent Joe Kastelic once hit Adamson over the head, but he explains, "I was feeling down, and Chuck would spear you."

Reggie Primeau says, "He played better in playoffs, he came up big, stood on his head for us. He moved quick, moved out of position, but it was the right position. He was also lucky."

Once during practice in Minneapolis, Chuck says, he was not trying too hard and Ullyot got mad. He ordered Roger to send a few high ones by Chuck's head to wake him up.

In 1965, Adamson won the Norris trophy for goalies. He said modestly, "Having a good team in front of you makes it easier."

Gerry Randall had followed Adamson in Peterborough and then joined him in Fort Wayne. He won the Norris trophy in his rookie season.

Gerry is tall and could cover the net well. He was also a standup goalie, the kind Ullyot liked best. He says he started playing goal because the team supplied the equipment! When he reached junior in Peterborough, they supplied two sets of equipment, which felt luxurious.

Describing his style, Gerry says, "In my time, there were not a lot of hard shooters. In playing the angle I would chip the side of the ice so I would know where my feet should be. I also banged the posts. I always did that."

Stubby Dubchak commented, "Gerry's troubles had more to do with our defense at the time. This is important, it wasn't his fault, it's unfair. The defense was better in Adamson's day. We had nobody in goal in Fort Wayne to compare with Gerry."

The problem was heckling fans. Cal Purinton said, "If Josh had been able to close his ears, he'd have been one of the great goaltenders in the league. When they put up the glass, it ended some of this heckling because we couldn't hear as much."

Asked about how he dealt with the booing, Gerry says, "Jake Hendrickson [who played here 1968-69] said that in every ten games there are 7 good, 1-2 average, 1-2 bad. I tried to play it like that. I knew my style wasn't going to change. I'd just have to take it. An athlete has an advantage because they've gone through waivers, they've been sold and so on, they can deal with it. This is important.

"Review things after a game, I'd say maybe you could have stopped 2 but the other 3 not. As for whether they have a right to boo, the answer is yes. They have a right to say what they want. When you're entertainers you've got to take it, either way. At least it's not like Toledo where they spit and threw beer. Fort Wayne fans are not like that."

Randall deserves to be remembered more for moments like this one, which inspired some of Bud Gallmeier's finest writing:

"Held in check most of the way, the Blades suddenly struck with the ferocity of a caged lion. The big line—Stan Maxwell, Chick Balon and Chick Chalmers—was on the ice. Balon started it, crashing a shot from close range right at Randall. Gerry made the save but the puck came right back to Balon. Chick took another swipe—at another hole. Randall made the move. Then the puck was on Maxwell's stick. One of the shiftier stick men in the circuit, Maxwell tried another hole. Again Randall recovered. On his feet for the first three shots, Randall finally had to fall. He looked vulnerable. His defense was in panic. Then came another shot. Gerry grabbed it and tossed it behind the net. The Komets finally got control and shot the puck out of danger.

"As the puck sailed harmlessly down the ice, the fans stood and applauded; then they cheered; some whistled. On the ice Randall stood like a tall oak, his stick dangling by his side."

After this great moment, he returned to the bench, where Goodwin greeted him with, "Randall, you must think you're really something." Gerry reflects on it now, "I was always taught not to fall on your knees. I would never have stopped those three if I'd fallen down. Scotty Bowman taught me that after a game."

Although some people say players become goalies because they can't skate, it was not true with Randall. Jim Loser had a bet with Gerry that he could beat him, with Jim skating forward and Gerry backward. Gerry won.

Adamson says that Gerry once fought Bob Bailey, the only time he saw Bob 'back down and crawl away.' Dr. Priddy confirms his toughness, remembering a time when he was hit by a stick which left a

huge cut right under his nose with two minutes to go in the second period. He had about fifty stitches and returned to play the last minutes of the third period.

In 1968-69, Columbus needed a goalie, so Gerry was lent to them in exchange for Bill Staub. "I got a \$100 pay raise right away, so I liked it there," he said. In 1969 he retired.

When he was signed, Bob Gray (1964-66) was described as a roaming goalie, NHL-style. "He liked to handle the puck a lot," said Repka, "and going behind the net."

Gray went to Michigan State with Ron Ulliyot. Very tough, he wore no arm pads and was ready to fight anyone. John Goodwin remembers, "He played with no chest protector. He'd let Merv blast at him from the blue line with no equipment at all. He had a great glove and could catch anything that way." John Bloom says, "He was the first goalie I saw at the blue line. Also he could kick his foot over his head even with pads on."

Ivan Prediger of Des Moines would tease him. To get even, Gray dressed as a right winger, but he couldn't catch the Oak Leaf players. They kept away from him. Chase says, "He was the most colorful goalie we ever had. He was murder with the stick."

Wrist Shot and Slapshot

There was a change in shooting style beginning in the 1950s, when the slapshot first made its appearance. "There was no slapshot in our day," says George Drysdale, "Just the wrist shot. It was Bernie Geoffrion who brought in the slapshot. Lots of guys still use the wrist shot. Joe Sakic uses it to perfection." An advantage of the wrist shot is that the goaltender has less time to judge what is happening and react. With the slapshot, the time required for the backward movement of the stick warns the goalie what is coming. "He has two or three seconds to think," says Drysdale.

The arrival of the curved stick also changed things, as certain maneuvers were no longer possible—for example, with the curve, it is impossible to turn the play without turning the body. Ted Wright commented, "Backhand went out when the curve came in, because the curve was the wrong way. There used to be a lot of backhand goals, we would practice them. Ken would have us practice lifting the puck over a stick on the ice and have it land flat."

Older players observing the slapshot say that it is less accurate and less controlled. "They don't aim," says Thomson. "They just slap it as hard as they can. The goalie throws it in the corner and they go get it."

Certain players, such as Roger Maisonneuve, were famous for their accuracy, but Moe Bartoli, no slouch at scoring himself, insists that, "You never know how or why it goes. To be a scorer you have to shoot, and you have to try. Harry Sinden used to tell me, 'Shoot for the middle, the puck might drift.' The best thing is to practice shooting more. I used to stay out more to practice shooting. The goalies like that too."

The snapshot is a really quick wrist shot which flings the puck so it rolls off the blade. Not everyone knows how to do it, which may explain why it is not used more. Barry Scully had a quick one. It can be accurate and its quickness means the goalie cannot read it as well as a wrist shot. On the question of whether it can be learned or requires a natural talent like Scully's, Jackson Leef points out that it is a combination of both, requiring practice to hone the natural ability. "Everyone likes to slapshot," says Ron Leef, "Anyway, I can teach a kid with less coordination to shoot, with practicing."

There are other maneuvers, used offensively or defensively, which may hardly be visible to untrained eyes. "You could put your stick on the boards and let them run into the end," said Wright, as an example.

There are moves that were once common but are now used rarely. In the 2000-01 season, Michael Franke says, Dan Ronan gave someone a hip check and the ref called him for tripping. The ref did not know what a hip check was. It is legal, but he was not used to seeing it.

Lionel Repka said, "It's a gentler sort of check. When we were doing those demos for the film, I would show the hip check on Reggie. I do it and he'd flip over." Ian Boyce suggested that Ronan's check may have gone wrong. "Hip check is hard to execute, leading with the hip as opposed to the shoulder. You can't see the other player well and you may clip his knee, which is a penalty. Also, he can hit you with his stick." Mike Boland was known for his hip check in the 80s. Ron Leef commented, "You're vulnerable when you're bent over with your butt sticking out."

The gentleness of it may also not be apparent to everyone. Ted Wright remembered, "Pembroke used to give a hip check, he would get him on his hip, the guy rolls, you get up and he flips. A guy rammed my back in Dayton. I did that Pembroke hip thing and I tossed him, he flipped about three times hit the boards and didn't bother me again."

Bob McNeil said, "When Butch McCaig was playing, he hit Eddie and sent him to the hospital. Then they'd throw the hip, not like now." Paul Shmyr said that in the sixties, "We called it going for the knees. It's a legal check if you know how, but if somebody did it, you knew it was war."

Whizzer

Norm Waslawski was IHL rookie of the year in 1958-59, his first season with the Komets. His heavy shot helped him make an impressive debut here, scoring a hat trick in his first game. He went on to Winnipeg in 1959-60, where he was WHL rookie of the year.

Both Thomson and Stanutz say he should have gone up to the NHL. His shot was quick as well as heavy. "He could snap the puck so fast you couldn't see it go," said Dick Zimmerman. "He would practice angle shots." "He was the best position player we ever had," said Len, and Repka commented, "He could shoot from either foot, and had an uncanny ability to intercept shots, he was great at interpreting plays."

He started in Winnipeg, was drafted by Chicago but broke his shoulder during his first play on the ice and was out until Christmas. He spent an unhappy time with Eddie Shore's Indians. The most memorable event was when Shore telephoned Norm's hotel and asked if Mrs. Waslawski could teach Norm to skate. He left there, but Ulliot remembered him from his junior days and invited him to Fort Wayne.

He played here for one year, then spent three seasons away before returning in 1962. When he left in 1959, Ulliot had said, "I doubt if we'll find another Whiz," so it isn't surprising his return was greeted with enthusiasm by the *Journal Gazette*, who chronicled his every move that season. Describing the game of 15 December 1962 against the Port Huron Flags, they said, "Waslawski, whose addition to the club should perk up the offense, stole the puck and beat goalie Normand Jacques at 11:56 and then skated in from the red line after a pass from Walt Bradley to make it 4-2 at 12.53." Later, "Then Waslawski² came through with a beauty for the hat trick. He scored from far out on a difficult angle shot at 13.40."

One game he remembers well was 22 March 1963 in St. Paul. "I scored five goals," he says, "And hit the goal post three times, but we still lost 8-7. I was so angry, I said to Chuck, 'I scored enough goals to

² Norm's name was consistently misspelled by both papers in the early years.

win the hockey game, and you're a sieve.' Everything was clicking, it was one of those nights." At the end of the first period, St. Paul had the lead 4-0, by the end of the next, it was the Komets 6-5. Norm had scored at 2:07, 4:55, 11:19 and 12:16. The fifth was in the last minute of play.

Norm's stats reveal remarkably few penalties, which is why his teammates reacted as they did to an incident in Omaha during the 1962-63 season. "The Knights had Ted Lebioda, an animal," remembers Chuck Adamson, "But we had animals, too, Ted and Cal. There was a brawl, everybody had a man and Was was on the bench. Ken orders him out and Lebioda just drills him. Everyone was laughing."

A torn groin muscle ended his career but he loved the game and later played in a senior league in Lima, Ohio with Goodwin and Primeau.

Reggie Primeau

Reggie Primeau still speaks highly of his days with Eddie Shore—perhaps because he was there such a short time. He spent five days in Springfield, Mass., and never got to play. However, Shore taught him things that influenced the rest of his career in that time.

"He taught me to jump facing the play over the boards into the play," he said, "And how to lace my skates so the doctor could free an injured foot quickly. He taught me to shoot with my knees bent." The stance was important. "You have to bend over and grind, don't skate upright. If you're doing it right, you'd last a minute and twenty seconds. Guys who lasted three minutes weren't doing it right." He said his wind was okay because he played ball and ran in the summers.

He spent time in Troy, Greensboro, Milwaukee and Portland, where he was cut midseason for a returning player. Ullyot had coached Reggie in Prince Albert and had been keeping track of him, so he invited him to Fort Wayne. "I was surprised to get the call," says Reggie. "So I grabbed my skates and got on the train the same day. I played as soon as I arrived. I'd almost given up, but my mother told me to stick with it."

His teammates rate Reggie at the top as a smooth stick handler, playmaker, puck carrier and for his ability to 'dance on his skates.' "He could skate a whole period and they couldn't take the puck away from him," said Dick Zimmerman. His finesse was on show during the game of 5 December 1962, when Glenn Ramsay had stopped a shot. Before he could clear the puck, Reggie skated around the goal, slipped it from Glenn and knocked it in. Gallmeier wrote of a game in February 1963, "Reggie Primeau was all over the ice and wormed his way out of jams

with the puck to the delight of the crowd.” George Polinuk said, “Give him guys who could score and they would.” Gerry Randall confirms this, “Randy Gates couldn’t put the puck in the ocean, but playing with Reggie he got 30. Whoever played left and right with Reggie would score.” Randy’s season with Reggie was by far his career best, with 30 goals and 68 points, almost three times his second-best.

Reg remembers the 1963 series against Minneapolis. “I had a sore left elbow and I got a breakaway. I faked Ray Mikulan, he came out and I scored. I was lucky he went for that because I didn’t have the strength for much more.” Also in that series, Ullyot asked the K’s to shut down Ken Yackel, one of the Millers’ top scorers. “Everyone was supposed to smother him, watch him close. Ken rarely would send a player one on one.”

Asked the secret of his success, Reggie talked about toughness, saying, “I mean mentally tough, not being afraid, if you get hurt, get up and keep going, if you’re sick, don’t miss a game, you can do it with colds or the flu. If you want to get a guy back, don’t get a stupid penalty, wait and see. That’s tough to do if you’re young.” He boiled it down to, “Step in front of a guy to stop them. That’s the secret, everybody does and it helps to win.”

A highlight of Reggie’s career was 10 March 1965, when Sonja Primeau gave birth to a son, and Reggie celebrated at that night’s game with a hat trick.

Turner Cup Season, 1962-1963

The early part of the 1962-63 season gave little hint of what was to come. The K’s had an early losing streak, for which Adamson was blamed, but by early December Ullyot described him as ‘playing sensational hockey at times.’

Defenseman Nelson Bulloch was purchased from St. Paul in November. John Goodwin said he ‘solidified the defense, helped us play as a team.’ Later in the season, Gallmeier called him Nifty Nellie, saying he steadied the defense and gave the offense a spark, too.

Also in November, rookie Merv Dubchak made his first appearance at the Coliseum, but wearing a St. Paul uniform. He scored in the second period. The *Journal Gazette* described him as ‘highly touted’ and ‘scholarly appearing.’ On 17 November the K’s whipped the Minneapolis Millers 6-1, with Walt Bradley scoring four goals. After Christmas, Walt was traded to Omaha, and in the 23 February game,

scored two against the K's, causing Wiegman to comment, "It appeared as though he had come back to haunt his old mates."

The defense was further augmented in December by Ivan Prediger, who came from Omaha. Badboy Prediger added color to Komets games for the rest of the season. Early in January Bert Aikens was sold to the Millers. He had been in Fort Wayne a little over a year.

Goodwin and Rivard were beginning their partnership by acting as penalty killers, and impressed Carl Wiegman of the *Journal Gazette*. He commented in March that Rivard had been 'a disappointment' on the tally sheet, but Bobby countered that by scoring in the next two games.

During December, the Komets hit another slump, but revived in January. On 7 January, Adamson had his second shutout of the season, including a magnificent save in the last minute of the game when Bill LeCaine, the formidable Port Huron Flags winger, had a breakaway.

It was a season of hat tricks, scored by Long against the Zephyrs, Wright against St. Paul, and Thornson. Maisonneuve, at thirty the oldest man on the team, had two.

In January and February, the Komets led the league, but by the end of the month their lead had been cut to two points. March continued up and down.

Primeau required twelve stitches after a puck hit him while he was on the bench; he returned to play during the following period. Prediger had an accident with Moe Bartoli's stick resulting in a cut nose, but he was gone to the dressing room for only ninety seconds before he was back.

It was quite a year for former Komets. The Flags beat the Komets on 15 January, and all six Port Huron goals had a former Komet behind them, including Sid Garant, John Hartig and Lloyd Maxfield. Hartig, a rookie, had been released by the K's after twenty games and dithered before deciding to report to the Flags. His short career's best year was 1963-64, when he played the tough guy in Muskegon.

The game of 6 March featured former Komet Harold Ellis in the nets for Des Moines. Two of their three goals were scored by Barry Jakeman, another ex-Komet. Rookie Jakeman had been released in 1961-62 after being injured. He referred to the USHL as 'bush league' and expressed hope that Des Moines would join the IHL, which it did the following season. He had some thirty-goal seasons with Des Moines and Toledo in the mid-sixties, and later was a linesman.

On 10 March Muskegon's Joe Kastelic 'skated through the entire Komet team' to score in the third period, while the K's had a man advantage.

Eddie Long scored his 400th career goal on 12 March; he was the top IHL goal scorer and had scored more points than any other player in the history of the league. Norm Waslawski had returned to the K's in November and scored 35 goals in 52 games, including five in one game.

The season ended with a series of road games, because a basketball tournament meant the Coliseum wasn't available. The Komets dribbled their lead away with a series of losses. On 26 March, Fort Wayne played Omaha and the Knights began with a series of penalties. Glenn Ramsay (their goalie) went and sat on the bench in disgust and the referee gave him 15 seconds to get back to his net, which he did. In a cliffhanger, the Komets finished first with 75 points; the Millers had 74 and Muskegon 73.

The Komets faced Muskegon in the semifinals, and beat the Zephyrs 4 games to 2. The most memorable of these games came on 9 April, when Muskegon was ahead 6-1 and the Komets made a miraculous comeback.

In the early games, Adamson seemed vulnerable on the angles, so Ullyot worked on that in practice. He told Chuck to find a spot on the boards to use as a guide. He started stopping the angle shots. Another detail is a good example of Ullyot's talent for basics. Gallmeier described it: "...there were shots from straight on 15-30 feet. These were getting by [Adamson]; even at practice. Ullyot couldn't understand why. Then Ullyot saw it. 'He was holding his glove hand with the palm closed over his knee. He was losing that fraction of a second when he had to turn the palm around to make the catch. I told him about it and he said, "Maybe that's it. I never thought about it." He now has the palm open and all he has to do now is raise the hand. The glove does the rest.'"

Ullyot also went with three lines: Prediger-Rivard-Goodwin, Primeau-Waslawski-Maisonneuve, and Thornson-Wright-Long. He kept only three defensemen, Repka, Gary Young and Bulloch. Rivard seemed galvanized; after scoring only 20 goals in 68 games during the season, he had five in the first five playoff games.

Prediger targeted Bryan McLay, one of Muskegon's leading scorers, with the result that McLay could hardly get off a shot. There was also a feeling that Muskegon's powerhouse trio (Lallo, Glaude and Konrad) had their age against them; they seemed to tire in the third

period. Asked for the cause of his eventual victory, Ulliot said, "Younger legs."

When the K's lost Wright with a bad back, they brought in Gary Sharp. He was a 60-goal man from Greensboro (EHL). He came to the arena straight from the airport and scored two goals. "He was a fast skater with a good shot," said Goodwin.

The series winner on 9 April was packed with thrills. In the second period, Muskegon led 6-1, then the Komets scored six consecutive goals. Eddie had four assists and Sharp another pair of goals. Adamson made flashy saves and so did Long. Gallmeier wrote: "...the puck trickles through [Adamson's] legs and slides slowly towards the goal, now left vacant. It enters the crease. It's halfway in. But it never makes it. Steady Eddie Long pops into view from nowhere and slaps the puck aside."

The tied game went into overtime. In the first two faceoffs, Norm gave Roger the puck so the King of the Angles could make a shot. Neither time it worked. Third time lucky, at 5:28 he sent a backhand from 25 feet out. The series was over, the score 7-6. Chuck said, "They outplayed us, we shouldn't have won. When it got to 6-3 after being 6-1, it felt better."

In the finals, the Komets defeated the Minneapolis Millers 4 games to 1. Here are some highlights from that series:

In the 13 April game, Len got a natural hat trick, Rivard two goals.

Bert Aikens shot and broke Adamson's stick in two, forcing him to work without a stick; Ken Yackel scored.

Following Prediger's success with McLay in the Muskegon series, Ulliot put him on IHL scoring leader Moe Bartoli. Ivan remembers, "Ken came to me and said he wanted me to cover Moe, because he was running away with scoring in the playoffs. I told him he wouldn't get a goal. All I did was follow him around all the time, right to his box. Moe was hot-tempered and he got upset. I even phoned him at home and told him, 'I'm going to be on you like a wet blanket.' Moe took a lot of stupid penalties on me. You could do things in those days."

The Millers' forechecking kept the K's in their own end in the game of 14 April, and Ulliot moved Prediger back to defense. No longer blanketed, Bartoli fired a 40 foot angle shot past Chuck. He scored twice.

On 17 April Bulloch fell to the ice to stop a point blank shot which left a blue mark. There was no goal.

Toward game's end, Adamson needed a respite, so Thomson, Waslawski, Sharp and Long kept the play in the Millers' end. Yackel described Adamson's work in this game as 'simply sensational.'

Badboy Prediger was maintaining his reputation. He fought Aikens twice in the first period, resulting in 10 minute misconducts. The fans were ragging him, so Carl Wiegman asked how he liked it. "I love it," he replied. In the following game, Yackel elbowed Prediger, breaking his nose.

Among the fans in Minneapolis were some from their rival, St. Paul, wearing buttons saying, "Fort Wayne Komet Boosters, St. Paul Branch."

Before the fourth game, Chuck and Norm were in their hotel room watching television when it caught fire, filling the entire floor with smoke. Obviously, Adamson was hot even off the ice.

In the fourth game on 20 April, there were two goals each for Roger and Norm (it was his 25th birthday).

The fifth game on 23 April in Fort Wayne clinched the Turner Cup, the first for the Komets. The score was 4-2. As the fans poured onto the ice at the end of the game, "The players were throwing their sticks into the air and the fans were catching them," remembers fan Dennis Blume, "I didn't go for a stick, I went for the puck." Thirty-eight years later, he gave the puck to Colin Lister.

Sharp said winning this championship meant more to him than the one he had won earlier with his own team. Reggie Primeau summed up the meaning to him: "There are so many players, and with only six NHL teams, lots never have the chance to be on a cup team. Winning the Stanley Cup, the Turner Cup, there's no difference. Just to win is a great feeling." He said the 1963 team 'understood each other, were well knit with no cliques—it was all teamwork, laughing together.'

Goodwin pointed out that the series was earmarked by great goaltending, not only Chuck in the Komets net but Ray Mikulan of the Millers also. "He's a great standup goalie, tough to beat."

The Flying Frenchman

Roger Maisonneuve grew up in Goward, a small lumbering town in northern Ontario. He cut slats for window blinds, but he also worked with the logs. Once he was moving a stack of logs, something broke and they fell into the lake. Roger moved nimbly over them and didn't even get wet. "He was fast," says his wife Shirley, "Skating, too."

He played for a time in the EHL and IHL before joining his brother in Harringay, a suburb of London, England. A newspaper clipping from the time says, "Opposing goalkeepers say he has the hardest shot in British hockey." He was in Fort Wayne in 1957-58 before spending four seasons in Toledo. It was a lucky time for him: he had three seasons with more than 80 points and he met Shirley. He was with the K's again through the mid-sixties.

Not only was his shot hard ('like a hammer' according to Cal Purinton) but it was very accurate. Lionel Repka remembers, "Sometimes when we were in Toledo we would tell Roger to shoot a few high ones at the goalie. His wrist shot was harder than most guys could stop, and he could put it five feet or two feet high, whatever you wanted. He could shoot a few at the goalie to get him thinking." Jack Loser remembers, "Once we had no ice here, so we went to Lima to practice. There was a screen at the end with a three-inch gap in it. Roger put the puck through it on end, two out of four shots." He scored his 300th career goal on 27 January 1965 in Des Moines.

Everyone remembers Roger's overtime goal of 13 February 1963. Reggie took the faceoff, got the puck to Goodwin who sent it on to Roger. A 15 foot angle shot zipped past Norm Jacques of the Port Huron Flags, who banged the goalpost in disgust. Roger told Bud Gallmeier, "I didn't have time to aim. I saw [Marcel] Goyette coming at me from the rear and just let fly. I knew when it left the stick that it was a good shot but I didn't know whether or not it would slip through the hole. He got a piece of it but not enough."

Roger never had more than forty penalty minutes in a season. "He wasn't a fighter," Shirley confirms, "but I once saw him trip someone. He denied it, but I saw him." Bob Bailey once knocked Roger on the head and split him open, but he didn't retaliate. "He was too mild-mannered," said Eddie, "It took him 72 games to get mad at Bailey."

Roger toured Europe with the 1965-66 US national team. The K's announced he'd been traded to Dayton in 1966. "We saw it in the paper," says Shirley. "They did it because they knew we wouldn't go. It was a bitter time." Roger retired instead.

In his later life, everyone knew Roger as a former Komet. He kept the penalty box during games at the Coliseum, and he and his dog were familiar figures around town. He didn't coach juvenile, Shirley explains, because he didn't like to hurt people and sometimes the boys' parents could be difficult.

Shirley has a real hockey wife story: "The players would bring clothing home and drape it around. It would drive the wives crazy. Once Roger hung his jockstrap from a lamp. I had plenty to say about that."

Tough Opponents

There were rivalries between teams—different ones at different times—and between players. When Toledo had a line called Murderers Row, players might feel some qualms. Some spoke of the Toledo flu.

The flu struck in different places. Cal Purinton tells, "When some other IHL teams folded, Des Moines got a number of players, but they seemed to get the worst ones. The Des Moines bus was in three sections, because the guys hated one another. It wasn't like Fort Wayne at all. The atmosphere in Des Moines was so bad, a couple of our players used to get the 'Des Moines flu' as we called it, they seemed to get sick when we were scheduled to play there."

In each era there were players famous enough that the fans in other rinks came out to see them, whether they were fighters or scorers, the way Steve Fletcher was on the K's in the 90s. In the 60s it was Bill LeCaine of Port Huron, who had both goals and penalty minutes. Stubby said, "He was tough and he could skate. He was dangerous whenever he was out there." Cal Purinton named Bill as the player he fought most in his career. John Goodwin had played juvenile against him, called him 'tough and crude,' and recounted, "We got in a stick fight here in Fort Wayne. I got a cut in the head, thrown out and suspended. It was my only suspension." Ron Ulliyot referred to him as 'unpredictable.'

Ted Lebioda played against the K's in Troy, Marion, Omaha, Toledo and Dayton. One year he accumulated over 300 penalty minutes. "You never knew what he was going to do," said Goodwin. "There was a fight in Dayton and afterward I was bending over to pick up my gear and Ted drilled me in the head. He did it to Norm, too." Stubby said, "The first game I played with St. Paul, I beat the snot out of him. I accidentally stepped on his hand with my skate and he was out for three weeks. John Bailey said, 'Don't worry about that bastard, just give it to him.'" However, Gerry Sillers said he was quiet, even on the ice, and has a good sense of humor off it. As Cal points out, on-ice fights did not lead to off-ice animosity: "Guys are guys. You don't care about what happened in the game." For most, there was still time for a beer after the game with the same guy whose face had been pressed against your fist.

It was easier to continue fights in the penalty box when there was one long bench for both teams. In Fort Wayne, the penalty box cop was Bill Kahn, who sat between the opposing players.

"Dino Moscatto in Toledo always had a red hankie in his pants that he waved when he got a goal," remembers Ron Ulliyot, "I got cross checked and turned to fight and it was Dino. He was tough and I wasn't sure what was going to happen, but he stepped on his skate and fell down. Everyone thought I had felled him. When we got to the penalty box we had the cop between us, but Dino winked and the cop moved. It was the longest five minutes of my life, but Dino didn't do anything. He never bothered me again."

When they opened the new rink in Columbus, they hired a security guard for the penalty box. The K's were playing the Checkers and Cal started a big fight. Suddenly there's a guy in a suit running on the ice with a gun. It was the security guard. Someone stopped him, but he explained, "I was hired to break up fights."

Not all these tough opponents were big fighters. Joe Kastelic spoke of Guy James, "I couldn't get around him. He checked me and was so fast I couldn't move." Dennis Desrosiers played in Saginaw and Flint in the 70s and 80s, with big penalty points. "I had his number," says Robbie Irons, "He had a slapshot that was unusually high." Irons also remembers John Flesh in Milwaukee and Dayton, who would blast the puck and laugh for no reason.

The scorers would also cause concern and the names come up through the years: Maxfield, Bartoli, McLay, Yackel, Greg Jablonski when he was in Omaha, Glaude, Michayluk. The K's would try to keep track of them and they would do the same to us. "In Flint I was scoring, they played a tough game," says Ron Leef, "They didn't like me so they were rifling shots and hit me in warmup."

Planning was a good idea. "You need to know the style and characteristic of play of other players," said Carey Lucyk, "You need to know how to stop him. Muskegon had the rough guys, the team was a handful." Knowing the style, you could devise a way to deal with individual players.

Lionel Repka tells of one plan, which the K's called the Moose Trap. Moose Lallo had a hard time turning left. The Komets would catch him on the red line and give Len the puck on the left. Jumbo would be on Moose's right and Choo Choo behind Jumbo. Jumbo would go straight at Moose and begin shouting at Len to give him the puck. Moose began to

turn right, concentrating on Jumbo, and Len would pass to Lionel behind Goodwin. Choo Choo could zoom past Moose and then either shoot himself or watch for Dubchak or Rivard coming up on the right, for a pass. It worked, in our rink and theirs.

Some of the best remembered tough opponents are the other goalies. "That's one thing the IHL had, great goalies," says Norm Waslawski. "There's never been a shortage, Ramsay, Lou Crowdis, Eddie Belfour." Dick Zimmerman said, "Lou was a very fancy skater round the goal crease, the crowds loved it." Charlie Hodge, who spent long years in the NHL, was in the nets for mighty Cincinnati in the K's first year. "We always played a good game against them and we beat them once in the playoffs," said Long. "Your own level of play improves with competition." The top scorers also understood individual goalies' weaknesses: "With Jimmy McLeod, it was the angles," says Joe Kastelic, "When he's in the net put it right here."

The rinks also make a difference. The Coliseum, new and spacious, compares favorably with those in other towns.

Muskegon had the best, hardest ice. (Lionel Repka & Chuck Adamson)

I could always score in Muskegon and Port Huron, but not in Dayton. (John Goodwin)

The boards in Dayton were backed with concrete, had no give. When you hit them, you bounced, even the puck bounced. They were higher, too. (Everybody)

The rink in Milwaukee was big, old and comfortable. (George Kotsopoulos)

In Des Moines the boiler went out. There was frost on the mike and the coffee had ice on it by the time it reached me. (Bob Chase)

Troy had a great rink, but a small dressing room, made for midgets. (Eddie Long)

You tried to get a penalty during the last minute of the game in Grand Rapids, because the first guy in the shower had all the hot water. (George Drysdale)

Port Huron was such a cold rink, I had to wear an extra t-shirt underneath. (Robbie Irons)

The worst place was Johnstown. The fans were coalminers and if you said anything back to them, they'd wait for you afterward. (George Stanutz)

The arena in Grand Rapids was dim, an old wartime Quonset hut and very cold. To keep the pucks from going into the stands they had chicken netting behind the goals. I got caught in this netting once and couldn't get out. The play moved back down the ice. When they noticed me, they blew me offside. (Eddie Long)

The bench in Omaha was on three levels. The guys on top would have to squeeze by the others to get on the ice, so they worked it that the ones coming off the ice would go to the top, and everyone else would move down. The ones going on would be on the front row. (Lionel Repka)

There were rats in the Grand Rapids dressing room about 1980. They'd send somebody in to chase them out before the players went in. (Chuck Bailey)

In Louisville, we dressed in the basement. We were afraid of the rats and couldn't leave anything on the floor. There were cockroaches in the hotel, too. Or maybe it was the opposite, cockroaches in the arena and rats at the hotel. (Bob McCusker)

The arena in Louisville had the worst cockroaches. You had to hang your stuff up, and then shake your clothes before you put them on. (John Goodwin)

By far the best-remembered and most-loathed arena was the one in Toledo. Small and dark, full of hostile crowds, it was never fun to play there. Lionel Repka explains: "The Toledo rink was smaller than others. You would measure sixty feet from the goal to the blue line and then the space between would be smaller. In Toledo there was a short distance between the blue line and the center red line, and the result was that if you weren't careful you could get caught off-side easily."

The dressing room was small, too small for all the players to stand and dress at once. In addition, Toledo coach Terry Slater once painted the visitors' dressing room pink.

To get to the ice, the players walked through ranks of fans, and the bench had fans sitting up close behind them. "We had a cop next to the players. It was not really a bench, it was part of the stands. There was no plexiglass. Also, getting on the ice, there's a big drop. You'd almost fell on your face. We hated it," said Martin Burgers.

To get to the bus, players had to pass the concession stands and more ranks of fans. Jack Loser says the bus would be hidden in the exhibition hall to prevent vandalism. The trainers would wear helmets as they transferred the equipment to and from the bus.

The fans were very rough. They threw things on the ice, on one famous occasion, chairs. The arena featured cheap beer nights (starting at a nickel in the fifties, going up to a dime in the sixties and a quarter later). The result was a lot of beer-throwing. In the corners, the fans were right there and no Komet went into the corner and remained dry. "Every 25 cent beer night was an episode from the Twilight Zone," said Leef. George Drysdale laughed, "You didn't need shampoo in Toledo. By the end of the game you had enough beer in your hair instead."

There are plenty of stories about interactions between Komets and Toledo fans. Here are four:

During warmups there were people hanging over the glass screaming. Doug Johnston was not used to it and turned to see. There was an old lady over his shoulder and she spat at him.

Tony Horvath moved from Toledo to Fort Wayne. At his first game back, he was thrown out of the game and the next thing there was Tony in the stands, fighting.

Ron Ullyot remembers one game when a woman kicked him. He hit her, so her husband joined in.

Hartley McLeod remembers a game he refereed in Toledo when the fans got so violent the whole opposing team went to center ice and stayed there.

The Toledo fans especially enjoyed taunting visiting players in the dressing room. Ted Wright tried to do something about it. "There was this guy calling names in the dressing room door. I got behind him and pulled him up inside the door and shut it. I said, 'Now you tell them,' and he began to cry. They threw him in the shower and then tossed him out." Another time Ted came out in his long johns and threw a glass of 7Up at some hecklers. They ran and one was knocked down by a pillar.

The Toledo players seemed chosen to fit their environment. Among the most-mentioned is the Murderers Row line, which consisted of Paul Tantardini, Willie Trognitz and a third player whose name varies. Don Craig is one, as is Joe Nathe. Rob Laird remembers the first Toledo game in 1974, Murderers Row started the game by dropping their gloves and taking out the five best Komets. "It was like *Slapshot*," he said.

Toledo's tradition of tough guys shocked Rob Tudor when he first encountered them. "I was a farm boy," he says, "The security guards with guns, Tantardini, Ian MacPhee, those guys. It drove a lot of young players out of that league. They were playing in fear."

Gary Gardner was a Toledo fan who moved to Fort Wayne and changed his allegiance. He remarked on the traditional rivalry between the teams, "Toledo thought Fort Wayne was a special foe, an evil twin sister. It's hard to say why." Players in the 80s think that the balance of the rivalry shifted during the 1982-83 season when rookie Steve Fletcher took on Tantardini and, in the Komets' opinion, won.

John Hilworth spent some time playing for Toledo after his days as a Komet ended. "It was hard walking into the Toledo dressing room, and there's a guy I've been pounding on for two years. My first game back I wasn't going to fight anyone, I tried my best not to get into trouble. The hardest part was facing the other Komets."

To be fair it should be pointed out that one player looked favorably on the little arena. "I loved playing in Toledo," says Doug Rigler. "The small rink suited me."

The Brothers Bailey

When the Komets remember tough-guy opponents, the first name that comes up is Bailey. Most remember John first, but Bob also puts in an appearance. In 1963-64, he was briefly a Komet himself.

They were born in Kenora, Ontario and began their careers in 1947-48 in Detroit. Both played pro hockey for twenty years. John went from team to team, rarely playing a whole season anywhere. Bob was more successful, playing primarily in the AHL and NHL.

Everyone speaks of Bob's shooting ability and Chase referred to him as 'a magician.' He was also known as a charming man off the ice. Colin Lister retains an image of him down on his knees, signing autographs for children.

But, 'as soon as they dropped the puck something changed.' Bob was a stick man. When Gerry Sillers arrived in Fort Wayne, Bob was in Dayton, and he muttered to Gerry as he skated by, "I'm gonna get you, kid." Gerry Randall remembers chatting with Bob in a coffee shop before a game in Dayton. During the first shift on the ice, Bob said, "Randall, the first shot is coming right by your ears." And it did. It showed how good a shot he was.

Whiteside remembers a meeting with Bob. "I was coming round the net in Dayton. Bailey elbowed me, really nailed me, so I chopped him over the head with my stick. Bill Berg said to me, 'Cy, if you've got all your teeth, you won't have them by the end of the season.' The next time, Bob dumped the puck behind me. I was turning to get it about ten

feet from the boards. I knew he was coming up behind me, so I dropped to my knees, came up and Bob went over the boards. He never bothered me again. He did think he was king of the hill, but I can play good hockey if I have to."

Bob had a reputation from his NHL days. He had a stick fight with Tex Evans which ended with the sticks worn down to stubs. The K's bought him because they needed a tough guy. His most famous moment in the IHL occurred 28 January 1964. At a Komet game in Windsor, Bailey hit referee Frank Slota over the head with his stick.

Some people say it was a grudge based on a penalty from a previous game, which Bob resented, or that the ref had a Napoleon complex, or that Bob had something going with a Windsor player and the ref got in the way. Len Thornson tried to stop Bob and took a hit on the arm. Bailey was suspended for life.

The following season he was traded to Dayton who managed to have him reinstated. In 1965-66 he amassed 132 points (45 goals and 87 assists), with a modest 127 PIM, at the age of 35. However, he struck a linesman and that ended his career.

John Bailey never wore the Komet uniform, but spent plenty of time knocking K's down. "He was unpredictable, dangerous," said Chase. Like Bob, he was strong. "They were hod carriers, that's why they were strong," said Repka, "But John was two bubbles off plumb." Stubby says, "But he was the nicest guy in the world with his skates off. Once when he was in Des Moines he was coming down the ice and we collided. He came down on top of me and started to hit, he'd almost reached his fist to my face and he said, 'Stubby, it's you,' and stopped."

His shot was phenomenal. Moe Bartoli said he broke a goalie's mask with it when he was playing in Sault Ste. Marie, and Gallmeier wrote that he 'sent the puck sizzling toward the net like an atlas rocket launching a spacecraft.' Another player said, "He would shoot from center ice in practice and the goalie would hide behind the net." His best year was 1962-63 with Omaha when he had 30 goals and 86 points.

Illustrative of his tactics is the game of 24 February 1963, when he kicked Ivan Prediger, which was ruled 'a deliberate attempt to injure.' On 26 March 1963 he had a high sticking penalty eight seconds into the game and another for hooking later. The crowd was happy when Gary Young gave him 'a bone-shattering check.' John had had his head down, a big mistake. He got up slowly. While he was off for hooking, a K's fan patted him on the back, leaving a Komet booster badge behind, which he

didn't discover for some time. John's legacy is not that of a shooter, but of a goon, who would whack you for a bet, or come up on you from behind. He died in 1967 at the age of 37.

Turner Cup Season, 1964-1965

At the beginning of the 1964-65 season, the team Ulliyot put on the ice consisted mostly of veterans in every sense. They knew the game and they had played together for years. Gallmeier speculated that it might prove the best Komet team ever.

Among the new faces were rookies Bill Orban, Ron Meier and John Thompson, and Chick Balon, a veteran player making his first appearance in the IHL. Early departures included Thompson (after one game), Bob Brown and Nelson Bulloch. Meier stayed a little longer.

In mid-January, Ulliyot brought in Bob Gray for nine games, to give Adamson a rest, and bought Cy Whiteside from the Des Moines Oak Leafs. Whiteside, a tough-guy defenseman, was the veteran of many fights with Komets in the past. Now he was on the other side. In early March he was said to be 'excelling in every department.'

Whiteside had retired at the end of the 1963-64 season and taken a job in Colorado. He played for his college alumni team there, but was not happy. He called Des Moines and asked to come back, but says he was 'a straitlaced guy' and some characteristics of the Oak Leafs left him cold. He had a good offer from Dayton, but they had a pitiful record and he was interested in playing on a winner. Then Ulliyot phoned. "I had loved playing in Fort Wayne and agreed to come after Christmas. It was always a competitive team," Cy says. He enjoyed the Komets fan base, the players' closeness and said, "Everyone respected Ken Ulliyot, and Eddie was a fixture."

The acquisition of Whiteside seems to have been a galvanizing factor in the team's performance this year. Dubchak said, "Once we got Cy it jelled, we had a different attitude. He was rough and tough and he put some spine in a few people who didn't have it before. He could back us up, he could handle himself. He added that extra."

Jumbo agreed: "Cy was very tough. We were a good team already, but he must have solidified the defense." According to Pembroke, it also affected how the other side saw them, "Des Moines had a great respect for Cy. We couldn't win there before. He made a difference." Cy himself says, "I think I contributed the physical support they

needed. I would rather take a few stitches than let some young guy get manhandled, or some smaller buddies.”

After the Turner Cup win, a number of players told Cy it couldn't have happened without him. He says humbly, “Even some of the Des Moines players came and shook my hand, said so—Mikulan, Lea.” Chase said, “The best money Ken ever spent was when he got Cy.”

After their usual December slump, the Komets returned to form and finished the season in second place. The K's set an IHL record for goals this season with 344. Among the year's finer moments were 17 January, when Cal lost his stick but still contained a Dayton attack, and 27 January, when Reg took out John Bailey and Ivan Prediger with a single check. The fans cheered.

Muskegon's veteran star Moose Lallo played his final career game at the Coliseum on 14 March, waving to the crowd as he left.

The IHL's top scorers this season were Lloyd Maxfield, Bobby Rivard, Bryan McLay, Stubby Dubchak and Bill LeCaine. Len Thomson stood at #9.

To keep to a 14 man team, Eddie Long and Roger Maisonneuve bowed out, leaving the playoff lineup at Waslawski, Balon, Rivard, Adamson, Primeau, Dubchak, Goodwin, Repka, Orban, Whiteside, Thomson, Wright, Pembroke and Purinton.

The Komets defeated the Toledo Blades in four straight games in the first round. They had an encouraging start at 2:04 of the first game, when Cal's rush up the ice set the stage for Waslawski's goal. The second game saw Len Thomson with a hat trick. Gallmeier summed it up on 6 April, “The sweep over Toledo was basically a team effort. Offensively this is one of the strongest teams in the history of the IHL.”

The Komets defeated the Des Moines Oak Leafs four games to two in the finals.

Bill Orban had been out with a broken wrist for many games during the season but he was leading in playoff goals after the first game of the finals. His wrist continued to trouble him throughout the series, especially as it kept coming into contact with Joe Kiss' face. Kiss and Orban antagonized one another through these six games.

In the second game, Len scored four goals. It finished with a brawl after Prediger jumped Whiteside. Within seconds, both benches emptied.

After two wins, the K's lost to Des Moines in the third game, which featured another brawl set off by Prediger. Cy had Ivan in a head

lock when Shorty Melanchuk hung one on Cy, resulting in a memorable mouse. The Des Moines newspaper phoned him early the next morning asking for a picture. "The first time, Ivan crosschecked me, then he was on my back. The next game, he creamed Bill Orban, so I took him. I said, 'Let's see how hard your head is. You jumped my back so I can get on you.' I wasn't very mobile the next day, but I played."

Gallmeier seemed irritated by Rivard, Dubchak and Waslawski, who were 'not producing.' The IHL commissioner announced he would be attending the fourth game, and there were to be no brawls.

Des Moines won the fifth game and the star was Barry Jakeman, a former Komet. His story was surprising.

Jakeman's rookie season with the Komets in 1961-62 had begun with a bang, 11 goals in 19 games. Then an injury put a stop to production and he was dropped from the team. In 1963, he'd tried out for the Oak Leafs and won a place as trainer, which included stand-in goalie duties. He'd even filled in for Mikulan once and acquitted himself well. The following night Mikulan was back but a forward wasn't, so Jakeman skated for him and scored a hat trick. After that he seemed to have a place on the team.

Gallmeier wrote that he was 'one of the surprises of the Turner Cup playoff series. He's the guy who has really hurt the Komets, the team which cut him adrift three years ago.' He had five goals and five assists. Gallmeier and the K's seemed mystified how he did it. He quotes Cy Whiteside saying, "Barry just doesn't impress you out there, but he sure has been around, hasn't he? Barry is one of those guys who just happens along at the right time."

After the win on 27 April, Stubby said, "What a great feeling, no other team played together like we did." The team sprayed champagne on one another, but Jim Costin said, "Ken Ullyot was his usual calm self...he must have been happy, but you couldn't tell it for sure."

Adamson said, "It was just a good team. We had been together long enough."

The Jet Line

The Komets had several successful lines in the sixties, but the top of the heap was the threesome dubbed by Bud Gallmeier The Jet Line: Merv Dubchak, John Goodwin and Bobby Rivard.

Goodwin arrived first, in 1961, followed by Rivard in 1962-63. Although Rivard had a slow scoring start, the two made a checking team

the papers noticed. And the next year, as Bobby said, "You add Stubby and we started to click."

Stubby remembers, "From the beginning it was the same line, ten games or fewer into the season." Why did it work? "Everyone was fast, a good center, good left and right, good chemistry. We had a good all-round team, too." Although Goodwin says it was chance that put them together, Bobby is inclined to think that Ulliyot saw something and made the choice. Whatever, he says, "we were good because we knew one another's moves and we didn't even have to look at one another."

Ken's assessment was, "I've had years as a coach when I would lead the players. Sometimes all I had to do was open the gate. With those guys that's all I needed. They didn't need anything more. At practice I was in charge. That's what they needed."

Merv Dubchak was born in Kenora, Ontario, and was given his nickname, Stubby, by his mother when he was very small. He still uses it. He played from 14-17 under coach Don Sawchuk, who insisted that Merv shoot and shoot. At 18, he left to play junior in Moose Jaw.

He arrived in the IHL at St. Paul in 1962-63, splitting the season between the Saints and the Minneapolis Millers. After seeing his shooting ability, Ulliyot brought him here in 1963-64.

Everyone who saw it remembers his shot. "From the blue line in he was like Rocket Richard, hard and heavy," said Paul Shmyr. Len said, "Most players shot high, but not Merv." Fan Don Weber thought he hit the puck 'like nobody I ever saw.'

One feature of his shot was that he was so fast and put so much of himself into it that he was unsteady. "He shot accurately, but he was always off balance and then he'd fall down," said Long. Cal agreed, "He threw his whole body into it, he'd throw himself off his skates. I've seen him score from center ice."

He was also a fast skater, "the fastest guy in the league from our blue line to the net," according to Cal, but he'd go flying into the boards. Even Stubby laughs about it, commenting, "It took me thirty years to learn how to stop, and then I retired."

When he came here, he also had a secret. He had asthma. At the Toronto training camp in 1959, he'd told them and found himself back in Moose Jaw. Coach Fred Shero there did not find it a problem. Merv took time off from hockey from ages 19 to 22 to allow his asthma medication to become stable. It was Fred Shero who invited him to the IHL. There were those in the K's who thought he was dogging it in practice, but it

was Vi Ulliyot, an asthma sufferer herself, who pointed out the problem to Ken. Ken allowed Stubby a little leeway, and the result was a scoring machine. He set a record, 72 goals in 70 games.

Reg Primeau described it, "Bob would give him a puck off the boards, he'd take off and shoot just past the blue line. The net would bulge so fast—it was fun to watch, like Bobby Hull, electrifying. He let that slapshot go, so nice and easy."

Stubby spent seven seasons in Fort Wayne (1963-70), in two of which he had over 100 points with the Jet Line. He stayed beyond the blue line, as he had been taught and was a great offensive player, but 'a nightmare for the defense' said Purinton and Baird. It didn't matter, for as Bobby observed, "You couldn't stop him. Just open the doors and away he went." He fought rarely, "only twice a year," according to Jack Loser. "But he was a whirlwind, throwing them in all directions."

In 1967-68 he broke his ankle, which meant he had to wear a brace. It affected his play and led to his retirement in 1970.

John Goodwin also had a boyhood nickname, Jumbo. He was the quietest of the three, who had spent a couple of seasons in Omaha. His second year there, a new coach told him he wasn't good enough for the IHL and sent him home. At the Portland training camp, Hal Laycoe suggested Fort Wayne. Jumbo knew players here—Maxfield, Voykin, McCusker—and came.

Dave Richardson, who played with him that first season, described him as having 'a quick start in from the blue line, always with his stick in front and a nose for the goal. He had a great snap shot.' Jumbo spent some time away with an injury, but on his return he scored twice against Minneapolis. Coach Art Stone said to Ulliyot, "Goodwin's our best player," which was a boost after the injury.

Behind the two goal-scorers, Jumbo did the setting up, got into the corners and got the puck out. Bobby referred to him as a 'work-horse,' and Primeau said, "Most fans would say Rivard, but no, it was Jumbo made the plays happen. He did the tough work." The year he was credited with 79 assists bears this out. Cal summed this up as, "Jumbo did the work, and Bob and Merv got the credit." However, Stubby emphasizes that the three worked together, not caring who scored as long as someone did, and that an assist was as good as a goal in those days.

Jumbo scored five goals in a Muskegon game, but he thought it should have been ten. "I missed four or five shots that I thought were

cinch goals." Ken spoke of losing Jumbo in the draft, "Then we got him back by making a deal with Des Moines—I'd fixed it so we'd be sure."

His teammates are generous in summing up Jumbo's contribution: "If you went for a drink of water, Jumbo turned on the tap for you," said Cal; Chuck Adamson considered him the most underrated player in the whole league and Terry Pembroke said, "He was the best thing that ever happened to the team."

The first thing people noticed about Bobby Rivard was his stature; Bud Gallmeier never wrote about him without adding 'little' to name. Adamson remembers a day in Peterborough when, "[Montreal general manager] Sam Pollack came in. He had this little guy with him and we figured it was a stick boy, but as soon as he started skating we thought, 'Oh boy, can he fly!' It was hard for people to catch him."

The speed was the next thing people noticed. He had a long stride and a powerful leg for his size. He didn't get hit very often, because he was so fast. "He was a quick starter, skated from the hips," said Repka.

Bobby came to the K's from Indianapolis. In Peterborough he was coached by Scotty Bowman, whom he liked ("I violated curfew regularly, he didn't do anything"), but Gerry Randall says, "He rode the bench in Peterborough. When he got here, he blossomed." His scoring that first year was sluggish, but the playoffs showed his true colors. From 56 points his first year, he leapt to 96 the second and then 116 in the first year of the Jet Line and 133 in the next.

In 1966-67 he moved on to the AHL where he was rookie of the year at 27 and the following year he played with the Pittsburgh Penguins. "What a feeling," says Bobby, "I finally made it to the NHL! I was on a line with Ab McDonald and Andy Bathgate." After several seasons with Baltimore (AHL), he returned here for part of the 1974-75 season.

Carl Wiegman told the following story in the *Journal Gazette*: "Biggest laugh of the playoffs came the other day when Bobby Rivard, the Komets' 5-5 center, met Roland Roy, the Millers' 5-4 center, in a hotel lobby. Rivard greeted Roy with, 'Hello, you little so-and-so.'" In fact, Bobby says he never thought about his size. "My wingers dug the puck out, I was the playmaker. I thought nobody's better than I am. It worked for me, and I'm stubborn." Asked about fighting, he shrugged, "I'm a lover, not a fighter."

As Stubby said, Bobby could do everything, and the fans who remember him agree. He was Marge Graham's favorite player.

The Jet Line's record for highest scoring line still stands in the IHL books: 364 points, 149 goals and 215 assists.

Writing about the game of 9 November 1965, Gallmeier described the smooth triple-action of the Jet Line, "Jumbo Goodwin launched the play in question into motion by feeding Merv Dubchak a pass off the boards. The pass was a little long, and Merv overskated it. But the Dubber retraced his skates, put the puck down and spotted Rivard in front of Bobby Sneddon [Port Huron Flags' goalie]. Rivard shot as soon as the puck came to him." He scored. In fact, he scored a hat trick that game.

Moments of the Sixties

"After the 1963 Turner Cup and for the next four or five years," said Cal, "We were the tightest group of guys in hockey. After the games we all went to a bar together, on Mondays we partied—everyone did, everyone came. When a bunch of guys retired and new guys came in 1967 and 1968, things changed."

Even in the years when they did not win a championship, the Komets of the mid-sixties were a pleasure to watch. With Len dingly-dangling, Roger firing, Ted and Cal punching and the Jet Line working overtime, there was always something to see.

1 March 1964 saw a mild disagreement between Ted Wright and Bill Sinnett of the Flags. Pictures in the next day's *Journal Gazette* showed linesmen Gus Braumberger holding Ted and Hartley McLeod holding Bill while Ulliot 'expressed an opinion' to ref Fred Blackburn. Fred was the referee the fans loved to hate, according to some.

In another fight that season, Ted squared off with Jack Costello of the Windsor Bulldogs. After a pounding, Costello went to the dressing room, but Ted decided it wasn't over, so he followed him and dragged Jack back on the ice.

Ted said, "We should have won the Turner in 64, but we lost an extra game at home because there was no ice, a flower show was in there. We had to play in Toledo. We rarely lost at home." Stubby said, "The guys who counted were worn out by Turner Cup time."

Another time, Cal was fighting two guys in the southeast corner of the Coliseum and Ted was in the north. He barreled down the ice and dove in the air, but the player ducked. Ted hit the boards face first, looked up and said, "I think I missed that guy."

The sixties saw an array of defensemen who were great at blocking shots—Nelson Bulloch, Prediger, Repka, Young. Cal said, “Nellie was probably the best shot block artist in the business. He’d be black and blue. He’d go down on a slapshot.”

A quiet family man, Nellie was always well dressed and ready to promote the team. He was told by Ullyot to stop the beer as he was gaining weight. Chuck Adamson, who travelled with a thermos of tea and honey, lent Nellie the empty thermos in Toledo so he could carry some water. Invited to take a sip, Chuck found it was pure vodka.

Nellie was good in the dressing room, he kept everybody high and loose. “He didn’t think the game was too difficult,” said Ullyot, “He played to have fun.”

The mid-sixties power play was so effective, Jumbo said, “If we didn’t score in a minute, we’d be upset.” The power play had Thomson, Dubchak and Goodwin forward, Rivard and Repka on defense. Primeau commented, “Len and I on a power play didn’t work because we passed too much.”

Ullyot’s strategies continued to guide the team. Reggie said, “Ken would rarely send one player on one player. He’d say, don’t let him go till the puck is out of their zone—it makes them shoot quicker.” Goodwin noted, “Ken always wanted a tough guy to look after the little guys like me, Bob and Reg.” Stubby agreed, “I’m not a fighter. When we had Cal and Terry, not too many forwards had to fight.” During practice games, it would be East versus West. Gerry Randall laughed, “The team was top heavy with westerners, they beat us every time.”

In 1965-66, Alton White (known as ‘Whitey’) joined the team as the first black Komet. Eddie Long says, “He wasn’t the first black player in the league, that was Ray Leacock.³ He was 6-foot-6 and 225 pounds. He decked Jack Timmins with one punch.” Al wasn’t likely to do this, being both smaller than Ray and mild-mannered. In a decade-long career, he only had more than 40 PIM once.

Born in Nova Scotia, White moved to Winnipeg at eight and played his junior hockey there. He had 37 goals his last year of junior. He received a munificent \$300 for his C-form from New York, whose training camp included 150 guys. His arrival in Fort Wayne marked Al’s first time living away from home.

³ Cincinnati Mohawks, 1952-53; Milwaukee Chiefs, 1953-54.

His race made no difference to the other players and it was only occasionally an issue elsewhere. Cal remembers one restaurant on the road which refused him service; the whole team left. "The worst place was Dayton," Al says, "But you don't think about it when you're on the ice. You're concentrating on the game."

His teammates enjoyed people's reactions when they called him 'Whitey' in public, and Jumbo remembers a night when Al took a hit. In the dressing room later, he told everyone, "Hey, I got a black eye!"

After a year in Fort Wayne, Al moved to the Columbus Checkers. Their press release in midseason (1966-67) said he had not been aggressive enough when he started there, but that had changed. It also said he had been the favorite after-dinner emcee among players in Fort Wayne. Coach Moe Bartoli described his great characteristic as consistency and 'he could skate like the wind.' After three increasingly successful years in Columbus, Moe suggested Al move to Providence of the AHL. He finished his career in AHL and WHA teams.

Gerry Sillers was new to Fort Wayne in 1965-66 also. He and Whitey joined Len Thomson on a line early in the season; later Sillers was teamed with Primeau and Chick Balon. Seeing a picture of Sillers and White in action from that year, Bob McCusker quipped, "Those uniforms were very effective. They even make you look big." Repka said Sillers was "very talented, with lots of potential. He was quick and strong, with good puck control, like Reggie in that way." Reggie said, "He was a smooth skater and a good shot, but maybe too nice to make things happen."

One of the most memorable fights in the history of the Komets occurred in 1965-66 when the sleeping giant, Roger Galipeau, met up with Bob Bailey.

Reg Primeau was coming round the net and Bailey, then playing with Dayton, chopped him with his stick. Primeau spun into the corner and Galipeau pushed Bob. Bob cut Roger's head and there was blood everywhere. They started grappling and Bob was poking at Roger with his stick, but little progress was being made and the blood alarmed everyone because they didn't know whose it was. It had become a general brawl with players grabbing one another to prevent further fights. Neither one wanted to quit and the refs let them go, figuring eventually they would hit the ice, get tired. Gerry Randall knocked Bailey's feet from under him and the fight ended. Only when he reached the dressing

room did Roger realize what he looked like, and although the doctors tried to hold him down, he returned to the ice.

People were shocked because Roger never fought. He was 6 foot 4 and like a rock. Pembroke, Legge and Cal would play-fight with him, hitting him from behind. "It was all you could do to knock him off his skates," says Cal, "And he'd do nothing." People were afraid of his size. "He was the only rookie we never shaved, through fear of death," said Pembroke.

The fans thought he was gutless, but his defense of Reggie proved otherwise. "He never lost his temper, he should have done it more often. We'd tell him, 'Roger, you gotta get mad out there,' but he'd just laugh. I don't think hockey was his niche. He was just trying it out." After this season, Roger left hockey for law school.

It was also in Dayton that Ted Lebioda accidentally skated over Gerry Sillers' hand. "The blood was squirting into the air," said Thomson, "Everyone was scared by it. That stopped the brawl."

Roger was teamed with Lionel Repka. "He was not a great puck handler," said Lionel, "I'd tell him, Roger, if you can't see anyone to pass it to, remember I'm your safety valve." Lionel mastered taking a pass from Roger, and it did him good. "Roger would put the puck at my feet all the time. I learned I had to be four or five feet behind him and before I knew it, it was perfect. He couldn't throw it straight, so I moved back. That's the year I got 80 points [1965-66]."

There were five defensemen in 1966-67, Paul Shmyr, Randy Legge, Pembroke, Repka and Cal. The third line that season consisted of three youngsters, Doug Reid, Ted Demchuk and Michel Rouleau. Gallmeier dubbed them the 'Wonder Line.'

In the semifinals, the K's faced Des Moines. In the last game in the 4-3 series, Ted Wright scored twice, the first after a missed shot. He carried the puck behind the net and bounced it off goalie Russ Gillows' back. The second came on a textbook goalmouth pass from Rick Hextall. The first game of the finals came on 9 April and the Wonder Line scored three of the K's four goals to beat Toledo 4-2. Gerry Randall gave a 'hot hand' performance by holding the Blades at bay even when they had a two-man advantage, and turned back three breakaways, two by Stan Maxwell and one by former teammate Chick Balon.

The second-last game of the finals (which were won by Toledo) was a thrilling night at the Coliseum on 18 April. Gallmeier said the

game belonged to Randall and Glenn Ramsay, the two goalies.⁴ The final score was 2-1 and both Komet goals were scored by the Wonder Line.

Tall, lanky right wing Doug Reid played here for three seasons (1966-69), as the tough guy on his line. Mike Rouleau spent only forty games with the K's, but later had 100 point seasons with the Charlotte Checkers (EHL). This year was Demchuk's only pro season.

A more successful career had its inauspicious start in Fort Wayne that season. Paul Shmyr played all his minor hockey in New Westminster, British Columbia. For \$100 and dinner he had signed a C-form with New York, who had sent him to Fort Wayne. "I think Ken had a soft spot for me because of the New Westminster connection," he said, but Sillers points out, "You had the big hip."

Paul says that people were surprised when he was signed, because he was the fifth defenseman and he hadn't made much of an impression. "For the first half a year, I was the worst player in the league. If it wasn't for Ken, I'd have been sent home. He kept throwing me out there. About the sixtieth game, I had no goals, Ken said in the dressing room, 'Shmyr, when are you going to score a goal?' I cried. Then about the 63d game, I scored and everything took off."

Pembroke said, "We were partners here, he's not a great skater but smart with the puck." Stubby added, "He's not afraid, he'd take one for the team." Len Thomson observed, "He couldn't shoot the puck from one end of the ice to another, but when he shot from the point it just went in." One person didn't care about whether he could score. He lived with Hartley McLeod's family. His daughter, Pamela Downs, says, "I thought Paul was a movie star. I was so upset when he got crashed up in the face."

Paul had a 16 year career, mostly in the NHL and WHA. He was later named Best Defenseman all-time in the WHA. His nephew, Brian Shmyr, played with the K's in 1975-76.

The playoff situation in 1968-69 was very complicated. Six teams played a round robin and Fort Wayne and Columbus finished with one win and two losses. The tiebreaker was to be the goal differential and in the last minutes of the series, Primeau scored to give the two teams identical records once more. The next tiebreaker asked who finished higher in the regular season standings. The K's advanced, but were swept in three games by Dayton.

⁴ Randall's performance is described on page 88.

Partway through the year, the Checkers needed a goalie, so Ulliyot effected a loan: Gerry Randall for forward Bill Staub. Staub was a leading scorer and Ron Burman wondered why Columbus was willing to send him away. They must really have needed a goalie. Although Staub only appears sixth in the K's scoring, his personal total (76) with both teams is eight more than the top Komet, Bob Baird. Asked how he did it, he says modestly, "Pop 'em a few and make a few plays. I was an offensive player." He also credits his line-mates, Baird and Primeau.

This was a transition year as the old-guard Komets from the glory years reached retirement. There were already some young guys coming up. Burman said, "We learned a lot playing with older guys. You knew they could have played up if they'd had the chance. Look at Merv, going in on the side, letting go a slapshot from the blue line, and Goodwin in the corners, getting it to Dubchak, and wham!"

Three goalies played with the team this year. Jim Shaw was the principal, with Randall and a few games from Ken Lockett. Jim played with contact lenses and one Thursday he played in Des Moines with only one. By Saturday he had lost the other, too, and Gerry had to take his place. Stubby termed Lockett 'a disappointment,' but a few years later he managed 65 games in Vancouver of the NHL.

In 1969-70, Ulliyot lured old foe Moe Bartoli to join the K's. Later player-coach, Moe said, "The player-coach operates by example, and it works. I had a good year the first year at least I could do what I wanted them to do. They were committed." He had led the scoring when he played with Minneapolis (130 points in 1962-63), had been player-coach in Columbus and ran a hockey school there. In 1966-67 he had battled with Ivan Prediger for most penalty minutes in the league. The players remember him as tough, wiry and still fast.

Moe split the season between two rookie goalies, Paul Hoganson and Jim Keough. Jim was a college player, whose only pro seasons were the two he spent here. Paul returned to the K's in 1971-72 as part of the Amarillo contingent.

The team hung on, ending forty points behind first-place Muskegon. They lost 3 games to 0 to Port Huron in the first round of playoffs. "Moe knew the stuff," said Dubchak, "But he was too nice a guy to coach. He couldn't bear down on the boys in practice—Len was the same. Moe would get mad and we'd say, 'Come on, Moe.'" Ron Ulliyot observed, "You have to be on the bench to get a feel for what's

happening. But Moe was inspirational through working so hard." Moe was later general manager in Columbus and brought Ron to coach there.

Asked who brought in the new players, Ulliyot or himself, Moe said Ken did. They did disagree once, about Floyd Thomson. Ken wanted to get rid of him, but Moe said, "If he goes, I do too." In the end, Floyd went to St. Louis the next season and Ken received a development fee for him. Floyd had a long career in the NHL and CHL.

The lack of personnel movement was no doubt a major contributor to the Komets' success during the sixties. "They lived here, played here, year after year," said Randall. Said Chase, "I wonder if people know how good they really were."

Players Come and Go: The Sixties

Ivan Prediger spent most of his career with the Des Moines Oak Leafs, but was one season with the Komets. He was known for his explosive temper and earned substantial penalty minutes, 1519 during seven seasons with the Leafs.

Although tough, he was not seen as the most talented player, but he wouldn't back down and was dependable. "He was generous off the ice," said Adamson, "But I hated him on the ice. When he played for us, I would cringe—here's my defenseman."

He was playing in Omaha and the Komets had come to town. A phone call informed him that he had been traded and would be on the other side that night. "I tried to regear my thinking," he said, then went to the rink, where the toughest part was going to the Omaha dressing room to pick up his skates. "Word had spread and I thought I'd have to fight my way out. It was the beginning of a championship year for me."

With the creation of the new franchise in Des Moines in 1963, each team had to put up two players on waivers. Ken told Ivan he was one of the waived Komets, because he would be going to the Springfield (Mass.) training camp, and if he made that team he'd be gone anyway. As it was, Ivan went to Des Moines for seven seasons.

In a famous moment during the final game of the Turner Cup in 1965, as Thomson scored at 14:21 of the third period, Prediger smashed his stick to splinters against the goal post.

Bob Baird played with Ron Ulliyot at the University of Michigan, where Ken first saw him. During his four seasons with the K's (1967-1971) he was always in the top six scorers, and led the scoring in 1968-69. His teammates regarded him as not committed enough.

Mike Kardash managed to amass 142 PIM in his 14 games with the K's in 1961-62. "He was a fighting little guy," says Whiteside, "I went in and headbutted Mike, cut myself and him. We were getting stitched up and I almost got into it with the doctor."

Bill Orban's rookie year was in Fort Wayne, where he amassed 61 points and a reputation for toughness. He went on to an NHL career. His stories about Fort Wayne convinced Gerry Sillers to come here. Cy described him as 'a tough kid, he could go get it, take on all comers. And he could score.'

Chick Balon spent two stints in Fort Wayne, 1964-66 and 1972-75. In the IHL, he also played in Toledo, Dayton and Milwaukee. "He played everywhere and made a difference to whatever team it was," says Pembroke. "For a certain level of player, it doesn't matter, he would be the same as long as he was playing, he just wanted to be working." He was not looking for a fight, but ready when one came along. "Chick's fights were always short," said Gary Gardner, "The other guys went down quick." John Bloom chose him as the toughest player he'd seen.

His way with the puck, not smooth but adept with the stick, earned him the nickname Hotsy-Totsy from his 70s teammates. "He could put the puck in when he wanted to," said Stubby, "I remember once he was going down the ice on a breakaway and he stopped, then started again. Sometimes he seemed to be in a daze. He did score, but what was he thinking?"

"I think I cost the Komets a game once," says Gardner, "When [Chick] was playing for somebody else, I was on him through the whole game. He skated around three players and got it home, and I was still shouting, and Chick looked up at me with a smile. He'd done it on purpose."

Neal Colvin writes: "Every time his name is mentioned, my Dad [Joe Colvin] and I say that trading him was the worst Komet trade of all time. This guy ultimately was on about 5 or 6 Turner Cup champions. It was like the Cup just followed him around. He was traded for a player named Doug Reid." Ray Brownlee played with Chick when he returned in the 70s. He said, "I marveled at him, he seemed so old [Chick was 33]. The thing was, his condition. He could skate circles around us."

Randy Gates had a good year with 68 points in 1967-68. Merv said, "He could skate like the wind, but some players never get the knack of putting the puck in the net." "He had guts," commented Pembroke.

Three seasons of respectable points and ample penalty minutes marked Eric Sutcliffe's time here (1968-71). Staub called him 'a tough grinder who could score.' Coach Bartoli said Eric would ask, "You need somebody slapped around?" A fan said, "He was small and tough, fun to watch. I was always disappointed when he didn't play."

Ray Brunel ended a long career in the WHL and AHL in Fort Wayne by leading the scoring in 1969-70. His 33 goals and 55 assists (88 points) were accompanied by a mere 4 minutes in penalties!

Dunc McCallum followed up his shiny rookie year here with a long career in the NHL and WHA. He ended as coach for the Brandon Wheat Kings. Brant Kiessig thought he was a wonderful coach. "He was a tactician, teaching strategy. In our 84 game season, we only lost 5 games. We were the top scorers in Canadian junior hockey." A number of Wheat Kings players from those high-flying years came to Fort Wayne at one time or another.

Colin Longmuir arrived in Fort Wayne from Toledo partway through his honeymoon. "He could skate like a son of a gun!" said Len.

Rick Hextall was traded to Fort Wayne in exchange for Gerry Sillers midseason, and left a year later (also midseason), going to Port Huron for Ron Burman. A memorable, skilled player, he could be crude with the stick, but 'good when he put his mind to it.' Neal Colvin remembers, "In early 1967 he was in one of the funniest fights I have ever seen. Lynn Margarit of Muskegon was one of those players who would slash and trip and hook you, but would never drop the gloves. Rick Hextall got hold of him. Lynn tried to turn turtle and Hextall drug him around on the ice alternately pounding him and then looking up to see if anybody was coming to Margarit's rescue. No one did."

Ron Burman's career was marred by injuries, the worst of which was caused by Rick Hextall. "I checked him and he came at me at the blue line. I managed to get a shot off, then he kicked me," said Ron. The resulting ankle injury required painful surgery and probably shortened Ron's career.

Trainer Terry Reincke remembers a Burman injury: "He was dropping in front of a shot and got it right in the nose," said Terry. "I helped the doctor get the bone stabilized. I had to hold probes up his nostrils. It could have been tragic, but noses are resilient."

Burman grew up in North Bay, where the local owner, Pete Pelangio, sent many of his players to the Port Huron Flags. Ron spent a happy year with the Flags before coming to Fort Wayne. Terry Pembroke

spoke of him as “a good citizen, the kind of guy you build a team around. You need those guys.” Ron’s nephew Mike Burman was a Komet in 1999-2000.

Fighters and Protectors

The list of top fighters in K’s history are familiar names: Wright, Purinton, Fitchner, Hilworth, Fletcher. Everyone has a favorite. Some of the names mentioned, such as Bernie MacNeil, might be less familiar except to connoisseurs.

Fighting is an essential part of hockey, however much people might tut-tut about it at times. Stubby said, “Fighting is a necessary part of game. Some guys were chased out of the league, people with talent who couldn’t take a hit or give a hit. Hits put you in the game.” The interesting thing about the fighting is that seldom are the harsh feelings carried off the ice, although it is possible that revenge may play a part. Not referring to fighting, Eddie Long said, “Toughness is going in a corner digging for the puck. When you get a good clean check, you say good check. Then you get him back.”

“You remembered what somebody did to you and then got him later.” Eddie may have been thinking of a game in March 1964, when he remembered something about Guy Trottier of the Flags, skated over to the Port Huron bench and tried to pull Trottier onto the ice. Carl Wiegman wrote, “Trottier’s teammates pulled the Flags’ winger back and a tug-o’-war developed with Trottier in the middle. Long and Wright were given misconduct penalties.”

Len Thomson agreed, “There was always a chance to get the guy back,” and Gerry Randall said, “That fight wasn’t about this game, it was about that game 15 games ago, or when they played Junior A.” Robbie Laird said, “Ian MacPhee and I had some real clashes, that dated back to playing in Regina,” and Dave Norris’ battles with Stan Jonathan had their roots when Stan was with the Petes and Dave with the Fincups in the OHA.

Steve Fletcher confessed to a long memory for some things. “During my first NHL game, I was out to take the faceoff, we were waiting for the commercial to end. Suddenly this guy [Lyndon Byers] jumped me from behind. No reason. He said he didn’t know why. I swore I’d get him back. It took me five years, in a game the Komets were playing against Las Vegas. I told Bruce Boudreau and he was all right about it. I went for him. Afterward he pointed to his back as if he didn’t

know what was going on. I said, 'Don't you remember? Five years ago you jumped me from behind.' He didn't even remember."

Fletch explained his philosophy. "I played my game, fought everyone the same. You're like a gunslinger, everybody's coming to get you. If I lost a fight, I'd fight you again. It's important to have no fear. I've seen people lose a fight and then lose confidence. You get split open and hurt that long and then get fixed up, have a beer. That's how you bounce back from losing." Everyone agrees it is important to bounce back; young players coming in who cannot do this, soon leave the league. "Faced with a fight, you must not back down," said Bill Richardson. "You'd become a target and get chased out of the league. It's better to get dumped once in a while instead."

Fletch was also famous for avoiding fights by whispering his intentions to prospective victims. "I might say, 'I'm gonna be all over you if you keep it up.' Big guys picking on smaller guys, I don't like it." The result is that he was booed in other arenas and he says, "That meant I was doing something right." Carey Lucyk observed, "We'd go to any city and someone would recognize Fletch. He dominated the game."

Over the years there has been a growth in the role of the enforcer. Speaking of the 60s, Moe Bartoli said, "I liked to have a few enforcers. It gives your better players a little room. On a three-guy line, that's how you wanted it, one being the tough guy, so you didn't have to keep your head up." Loser observed, "Ulliyot liked to have a tough guy around when you needed him." Ted Wright says you had to be more versatile then. "Enforcer is a harsh word, a more modern term. In our day there were no specialists. If you were only a fighter, you weren't here. You had to produce."

Laird explains the difference. "When I was playing, I had 25 fighting majors. If you looked at other teams, 80% of the players would be the same. Look at a list now, only 20% ever get in a fight. Select guys do the fighting. Most of them are limited players too. We fought to create space for ourselves. Now it's a matter of intimidation and protecting top players." Dubchak comments, "I can't believe people get away with what they do and nobody fights. The Europeans have ruined the game."

Players make observations about fighting:

"It depends when you get your penalty. Not when the score is 2-1. Our penalties were not in a bad situation." (Steve Fletcher)

"The fans love the goals, but they're into the fights more. You're not hurt by fighting but by stick work." (Cal Purinton)

"There's a code. Tough guys fight tough guys." (Colin Chin)

"Most tough guys don't fight the tough guys. They respect each other." (Ted Wright)

"I ain't getting paid enough to fight." (Emil Gilles)

"The old man sent me out to get a guy—get him off the ice. We were down 4-3. I felt bad about it." (Cal Purinton)

"I had some good advice from Bob Fitchner. If a guy is going to get rough, get twice as rough back. Find out how stupid he wants to be." (Dan Bonar)

"Big guys are the kind of guy you love to hit, because they can't get up." (Terry Pembroke)

"You gotta give the guy some more stick to let him know you're there. Hockey players have to have a mean streak." (Merv Dubchak)

"If you hit the goalie, guys would get you." (Cal Purinton)

When the big fights break out, it's important that everyone on the ice have someone to pair off with. Thornson said, "If there was a chance, five guys and five guys, you had to grab one." Stanutz observed, "I'd say wrestling matches, they might throw a punch but would more likely lean on each other. I don't remember seeing a real fight when I played [the 50s], but something would be missing if fighting were not part of the game."

John Goodwin, considerably smaller than Moose Lallo, always made a point of grabbing Moose as his man when a brawl broke out. "He'd get mad. He'd say, 'You're embarrassing me!' I did this all the time."

When the pairing off happened, it might end up getting out of hand. Ron Ullyot remembers a Coliseum game on 2 March 1975: "Two guys with minor penalties started fighting. Everyone on the ice stopped and paired off. In the end we all stopped, we were watching the four goalies fighting. Everyone laughed." Here is Neal Colvin's account of that game: "The Gems had a goon by the name of Gord Lane who started a big brawl by jumping Komet Dave Haley from behind. Another Gem, Brian Stapleton, did the same to Ron Ullyot. By the time all was over, the goalies were fighting, coach Ralph Keller punched Lane from the Komet bench and even both trainers had been ejected."

Terry Pembroke remembers the biggest brawl in the Coliseum, with Des Moines. In the end, they turned out the lights. Terry was fighting Pat Ginnell and they were both laughing at the end.

Brawls resulted in fines. "In 1986-87, there was too much brawling," said Colin Chin. "The first guy in had a \$25 fine. In 1987-88, the first year the NHL was in the IHL in a big way, they were very opposed to brawling and the fines went way up." Did the K's management pay the players' fines? Colin Lister says yes, depending on the circumstances. If the fight was meant to get the team going, management paid. If it was a stupid fight, the player paid.

When players moved to another team, how could they fight a friend on the old squad? "If I'd been on a team against Pember," said Cal. "It would have been a battle. That's the way it is." As for difficulties among team members, Eddie Long says, "If a guy was a problem, we took care of it in practice."

When it came to pure fighting, an outstanding Komet was John Hilworth. "I was a favorite player, fans loved me," he says. "Down in junior that's what they wanted. I was tall. I never threw a punch till I was in Drumheller [junior team], they taught me. I'd beat a guy up, the fans would go nuts. It's also true here. I wasn't a finesse hockey player so I had to do something." Ron Leef says, "Hilworth was the best fighter."

John reached the Detroit Red Wings using his fists. "I had kept my gloves on in training camp, but in an exhibition game I was in a corner with Tiger Williams, he elbowed me, or maybe I elbowed him. I had him down. The Red Wings were impressed, it surprised them. They played me a lot and every time I had a fight. They liked it.

John was not an indiscriminate fighter, however. "Only when you piss me off I'll fight," he says. "But guys came after me to see if they could beat me. Some guys would stay away from me, they were scared of me. I don't think of myself as scary. I just play hockey." He also did not like the coaches telling him who to fight. "I knew I'd be able to do the job in this league, but I like to play my own game. I didn't like people telling me what to do. To hell with the coach, I liked the other guys. Anyway it's chance. Dare to fight and you're a hero, but if it goes wrong, you're not doing your job."

The result was that he was respected. Doug Rigler commented. "It's amazing how much room you get when John is on the ice." Laird agreed, "He could do damage when he wanted to, but I don't think he enjoyed hammering people."

Hilworth has a permanently damaged finger. Here is Ron Leef's account of how it happened: "Kelly Rissling was traded to Flint during the 1982-83 season. Kelly wasn't too happy about the trade, and when

Flint and Fort Wayne next played, he was in a bad mood. The puck changed direction suddenly and I found myself turning to catch it. Rissling was beside me, turning as well and he took the chance to reach out, both hands still holding his stick, and nail me. Jim Burton and John Hilworth chased Rissling into the Flint bench. Hilworth came back with his little finger at a forty-five degree angle from his hand. I was sprawled on the ice, and the brawl was on." Hilworth's only comment is that every time Kelly came here, he acted like an idiot.

John also dealt with a Toledo goalie. The Komets were facing Toledo in the playoffs. Lorne Molleken was in goal and the power play was on. Hilworth was in front of the goal and Lorne whacked him on the shins with his stick. Hilworth didn't speak to him and Molleken did it three times. Hilworth turned around and, without taking his gloves off, whacked Molleken so hard he was out cold. They had to revive him in the dressing room. John had grabbed him ready to pound, but realized he was out. And, even with a team that included Paul Tantardini and Dave Falkenberg, not one of their players touched him. After that, he confirms, he could stand in front of the net and no one would bother him.

A list of IHL All Time Villains gives the top 44 penalty achievers. The editor of the list notes: "Over 40% were Komets at one time. Maybe they weren't so bad after all!"

Ted Wright

Ted Wright says that he lost only one fight in his hockey career. "I was twelve and the other guy was seventeen." It's believable for those who saw him chasing Bill LeCaine of Port Huron over the Coliseum ice, swinging his stick above his head.

Ted had spent three seasons in the IHL and EPHL before joining the K's in 1962. He played for six seasons and later worked in the office and coached. Bud Gallmeier called him Versatile Teddy because he could play forward one game and defense the next. Uilyot had asked him to move from left wing to defense in 1966-67 and he stayed there.

"He was big and could take care of himself," said Gus Braumberger. "If you didn't bother him, he would leave you alone." Dubchak remembered, "He was a team player. Ken would put Ted out with two of the Jet Line and somebody would get fixed up. When Ted got mad, he cleaned house." Ken describes it as 'keeping things flowing.'

Len Thomson said he had a role as both instigator and enforcer. Ken agreed, "He'd pick out guys. 'That Joe Blow, I don't like him, I'm

gonna get him next time.' He might not fight them, he might ram them into the boards." As for people fearing Ted, Ken thought not. "He couldn't have been too feared. He had a lot of fights."

As Stubby and Ken said, he was a team man. "Ted protected people," explained Ron Ullyot, "He did it out of kindness. You could count on him for help."

Ted remembered one fight: "I fought a guy in Muskegon. He was called the Gorilla. He was so big they said he needed two sweaters sewn together. He was a friend of Rick Hextall. The Gorilla was coming at me, grabbed me at arm's length. I couldn't reach him. He swung and hit me on the head. I hit him twice, on the hip and the nose. His nose got bloody and he quit."

As a coach, Ron Ullyot says, "He gave me a lot of confidence. He said, 'You make mistakes—great players overcome mistakes.' Sometimes I think he dwelt too much on mistakes. I was sorry when he didn't continue coaching." Ted will always be remembered as one of the great defensive players of the 60s.

Cal Purinton

It's surprising how often players use the word 'scary' when they describe Cal Purinton—and those are members of his own team! He was one of the league's top enforcers in the 60s and 70s, a team man depended on by his teammates and indulged by Ullyot.

"He didn't back down from anybody," said John Goodwin. "I remember him as a kid in Yorkton, he'd be at the rink all the time. He was always a happy guy, and the toughest. Year in and year out, he was the tough guy."

He was at the New York training camp in Winnipeg in 1963. The decisions had already been made about who was on the team. He was itching to get going, because they were forming the CPHL and he wanted to be on it. However, Ullyot was there and he picked him up. He and another boy from Flin Flon came, but the other boy lost a contact lens and wouldn't tell anyone. He couldn't see and was quickly dropped.

Cal had a look in his eye, still visible in pictures from that time, that may account for the 'scary' descriptions. Rusty Patenaude said, "That rough look was part of his image." He wasn't only a strong arm, however. Thomson said, "He was a great skater and could shoot, but he was here to enforce." Stubby agreed, "He had talent too. If he'd changed in junior, he might have made the NHL. They'd have toned him down.

He didn't drink. He drank a case of Pepsi and it got him all snapped up." Joe Kastelic, who played against him, says, "He was a little crazy, all the enforcers were crazy, but gents off the ice. Cal made a difference with his tough and dirty play."

His fights were not necessarily one-on-one. Terry Pembroke said, "I saw Cal take on a whole team while the rest of them were bent over tying their skates." Gary Gardner remembered, "Pembroke and Cal, those two were a load. One of them was always out there. I saw two guys take Cal onto the boards, one on each shoulder. Cal came out swinging, took them both on."

Terry Slater in Toledo had a long feud with Cal. Cal would give Terry a two-hander when the ref wasn't looking, or a rap around the ankles. Looking for revenge after he became coach, Slater brought in a tough Frenchman for a single game. The goon and Cal had a terrible fight. "They were butting heads, there was blood all over," says Loser.

Loser also says, "You deke him and beat him, he'd give you a two hander no matter who was looking. You only ever deked him once." Cal himself says, "For every penalty I got, I got away with two or three."

The reaction in other towns could be expected. They remember 'Kill Purinton' signs in Dayton, but Cal likes to point out he had a fan club in Dayton, too. There were four little old ladies there who liked to talk to him. "They'd want to kill you one week," he says of the hate signs, "But if you were traded to them, you'd be a hero."

He likes to tell of an encounter with Marc Boileau. "I had this arrangement, a a bonus for being under 175 minutes of minors in a season. I told Marc I'd hurt my ankle, couldn't play. He said, 'If I told you you'd have your bonus, would it be okay?' I told him yes. So, I had my bonus."

Stories of his toughness are legion. He spent one season taped from knee to groin, with a torn hamstring. He wore his equipment on bare skin, no underwear. "He played in practice as he did in games, which made us mad," said Ron Ulliot, "He'd hit us and we'd say, 'Stop it.' He'd forget it was practice."

Trainer John Bloom says, "The craziest thing I had to do was in Toledo. The team doctor there was always drinking, he smelled of booze. The Komets did not want him stitching them. Cal had a cut above his eye and said, 'Chopper, you do it.' All I'd done was help Dr. Stuckey blot some blood. No novocaine, Cal said. So I gave him eight stitches without knowing how. Of all the guys Cal was the craziest one."

His teammates think highly of him. Rusty says, "He provided a balance, with Marc and Tom." "When Cal was on the ice, you didn't have to worry about a thing," said Rivard, and Fitchner agreed. Former Toledo coach Ted Garvin, who was fairly crazy in his own right, wrote that he would have liked to have Cal and Pembroke on his team. Brian Walker summed up by saying, "We won because of guys like him."

The Boileau Years

The 70s began with a new player-coach, Marc Boileau. The old-time players were gone, although two remained from the mid-sixties, Purinton and Pembroke. Robbie Irons returned—the younger players were to say that Robbie, Cal and Terry were the 'old men' of the team.

In Merv Dubchak's opinion the caliber of players available to the IHL went down in the 70s. This followed the NHL expansion, which meant more players were needed there and in the AHL. "Also, we lost the contacts with other teams as Ken got older. Even the number of players at training camp went down." A reaction to this was that many more players were vying for the various places. However, Dave Norris said that by the mid-70s, the NHL teams had signed too many people and were holding back from signing more, and hopeful players were glad to find places at the lower leagues. Reincke remarked that more teams required more coaches and there weren't enough good ones to go around.

A 70s innovation was affiliation between the K's and NHL teams who would send their developing or surplus players to play here. At this time the link was with the Pittsburgh Penguins.

1971-72 saw an influx of players who had been in Amarillo, Texas, the previous year. The CHL team there had eleven rookies and coach problems, and was not competitive; it folded. "It was a learning experience in a high profile league," said Bob Fitchner, and Rusty Patenaude said, "Most of the team was looking to go up. There were lots of young guys with stars in their eyes because of the links with Pittsburgh." The Penguins sent seven Amarillo players to Fort Wayne: Fitchner, Patenaude, Larry Billows, Garry Swain, Paul Hoganson, Jim Pearson, Jim Boyd. Patenaude commented, "The Komets had a good reputation already. Ulliyot treated people well and I was happy. I just wanted to play. When you're young, you want to get out there."

He went on, "I got a slow start that year. We got stronger as the year went on and it turned out to be one of my most fun years in hockey. There's lots of pressure higher up, but less pressure here—a fun league. I

was on a line with Billows and Swain. Billows was a little older, one of the guys who was supposed to be carrying us in Amarillo. We weren't big. Gerry was small and me too. I was the goal scorer—and tough too. The real tough guy was Fitchner. My going there got me a pile of ice time and I developed into a WHA player.”

Rusty was also fast. “If we got the puck from the defense, the transition from our end was quick. If we could get the puck to Larry, we got lots of shots.” Tom McVie describes Rusty as ‘tougher than nails’ and compares his playing style to Edgar Blondin, small, quick, taking the puck to the net and fighting infrequently but well. Rusty confirms, “I could take a lot in front of the net and wasn’t intimidated.” He spent the next five seasons with the Oilers in Edmonton.

The Amarillo players certainly made their mark here. The top three scorers on the team were Jim Boyd, Patenaude and Billows. Early in the season, Irons and Paul Hoganson shared the goaltending duties, but Paul got hot and ended up playing most of the games. “In the drive for the playoffs, Paul played seven or ten games in a row,” said Rusty. “We were scoring high too. He defied you to beat that glove side, challenged players.”

Jim Boyd had gone from the University of Wisconsin to Amarillo for only two games, and he too started slow here. With Marc’s influence, Boyd came on for an 80-point season. Robbie Irons called him a stick handler and puck carrier. “He sure could carry the puck in a crowd,” said Rusty, who credits Marc with giving them all confidence, “He was good at quiet praise and you knew it.”

An interesting addition to the team in 1971-72 was the legendary Tom McVie. “He was pushing forty, strong and hard-nosed,” said Ron Ulliot, “But he had great legs. Those old guys would run the rest of us into the ground during practice.”

After finishing second (behind Dayton) in the IHL’s south division, the K’s faced Des Moines in the first round of the playoffs. “Our team was intimidated by Des Moines,” said McVie. “Our players were softer.” They won the first two games at home, but the third, in Des Moines, was a challenge. “We weren’t up for it,” said McVie.

In one of those electrifying events which move a team to another level, Bob Fitchner took on Bob ‘Battleship’ Kelly at the beginning of the game.

The 70s players, and the 50s and 60s players who still lived here and saw the 70s games, usually name Bob Fitchner as the toughest

Komet of the decade. It's a label he doesn't want. "I don't think anybody should bear that 'tough' name," he said, "I only had 39 fights in 11 seasons, that's not so much." Perhaps most of them were in the two years he was in Fort Wayne.

Tall and lanky, Bob may not have been the general image of a fighter, but he confirmed his status on two nights, one each in 1972 and 1973. Ray Brownlee remembers, "Bob had a unique way of fighting. He had a long reach, but there was no windup, no haymakers. He gave short jabs, instead, more like a boxer." The young John Baldassari, watching from the stands, said, "He was a legend. He fought to win and hurt the guy. I saw him hitting a guy with his own helmet once. He played every game like it was his last, like Dale [Baldwin]." Several people use the word 'leadership.' "He was good for us," said Ron Ulliyot. "A good quick shot and made plays. He stood up for other guys." Jack Loser said simply, "The toughest guy I saw here."

On the bus before the third Des Moines game, Bob made a conscious decision to have the fight. Kelly had 'a deserved reputation in any league.' The team needed something and Bob decided this was it.

"It was a most courageous thing," said McVie, "They dropped the puck and Bob went after Battleship." What happened next is unclear. Some say one punch and Battleship went down, others one punch and Fitchner went down but came back up again. Some say a clear victory for Fitchner. McVie comes down in the middle: "It was a draw at best. They were both a mess. The important thing was, he was telling the players, 'I'll do this for the team. No one will stand in our way.' We beat them easy. Bob won that series for us." Patenaude agrees, "As a team we really fed off that. It was one of the great hockey fights of my career."

Fitchner sums it up like this: "Kelly was very amiable when we met later. I was the benefactor—the incident helped get me drafted to Edmonton. For us, it ended the intimidation factor from Des Moines. Everyone seemed bigger and it eroded some of that negative feeling, gave us the confidence to win. It affected them, too. Des Moines had been riding on the back of Bob Kelly. Afterward, they played smaller."

The K's defeated the Oak Leafs 3 games to 0, but lost to the Port Huron Wings 3 games to 2 in the semi-finals. In that series, an injured Bernie MacNeil talked Boileau into letting him dress just for the warm-ups. MacNeil then started a pregame brawl that was not broken up for a long while since there were no officials on the ice. He'd had an altercation with Ralph Hopiavouri during a game on 8 March, which needed

clearing up. Garry Swain and Steve Sutherland joined in, but the two coaches broke up the fights. Swain and Sutherland joined up for round two during the third period and Hopiavouri got an elbowing penalty at 00:07 of the first period. The Wings won the game 3-0.

In game three, while Paul Hoganson was down and without his stick, Fitchner started a fight to get a whistle and stop play.

Marc Boileau came to Fort Wayne after fifteen pro seasons, which had included a year with the Detroit Red Wings. He was only a player at first but during 1970-71, Ken Ullyot was suspended and Marc took over as player coach. Ken's suspension was caused by an incident with a ref. He explained what happened to *The News-Sentinel*: "I was provoked into doing what I did. [Howie] Halter worked our games two nights in a row which is a mistake to schedule a referee that way in my opinion. Several things happened that carried over from one game to the next. Halter sent Jim Wilcox over to tell me if he heard any more yelling at him from the bench, he was going to give us a bench penalty. While Wilcox was telling me this, Halter called a bench penalty, and that's when I went onto the ice." The *Journal-Gazette* said he "was given a stiff \$1000 fine and a 30-day suspension by International Hockey League Commissioner Bill Beagan...Ullyot walked out on the ice and apparently tried to hit referee Howie Halter."

Marc spent two seasons playing and coaching before hanging up his skates and staying behind the bench for the rest of his time here. He was able to make the difficult transition from playing to coaching, "because he had the respect and the knowledge," said Pembroke, "He could fit in both as players' coach and management coach."

"He earned respect by how he showed how to do things, he was a communicator," said Irons. "I thought he had the ability to get the most out of us," said Patenaude, "He could set you up and you respected him. Coaches you don't have to like but respect—Marc I liked and respected both." "He was my favorite coach. He had systems in place and let you be yourself," said Brian Walker.

"He was a people person who knew how to motivate, build team spirit," remembered Ron Ullyot, "We had to go bowling Monday afternoons, players and families. There were lots of parties. He was a good speaker in the dressing room." "I would go to his house and have a beer and meal—I've never done that before or since with a coach," said Dean Sheremeta.

“Marc was the classiest guy,” said trainer Terry Reincke, “Flamboyant and outgoing. He gave his heart and soul to hockey. He was a hard charger. He was 38 when he came here and he’d skate as if he was 25. He was very dedicated to winning.”

Many players—and one in particular—remember Marc’s dog. “I didn’t have a car,” says Sheremeta, “So if I needed to go downtown, Marc would lend me his truck. The problem was, the dog always wanted to go with me. People would say, ‘Hi Dino!’ and you’d think I’d have a girlfriend in the car, but no, I’d have this dog!” Marc also brought the dog to practices. When Dean arrived, the dog would be joyful, since they were such chums. Dean was embarrassed and the other players delighted.

After his Turner Cup win, Marc went on to coach in the NHL. He died suddenly in 2000, aged 68.

The Man with the 45 Year Career

Tom McVie first met up with Ken Ullyot on a street corner in suburban Vancouver, British Columbia. He then found himself playing junior for Ken in Prince Albert.

“I was playing on a line with Orland Kurtenbach and doing well. I was wild off the ice. We came back from a road trip to Flin Flon and Ken told me he was releasing me. I was having too much fun. For two or three days I kept coming round, asking him to take me back, but he told me to leave town. I had a friend, a reporter on the local paper and he talked to Ken for me.

“Ken told me there was an outdoor rink two or three blocks from the arena. He told me to go there and practice by myself, show him I was serious. You know what it’s like in Prince Albert in the winter? It gets to be 50 degrees below zero. But I went. I went at ten every morning. I would skate up and down for an hour, shoot. My feet froze, my nose, my hands. I would hear that crunching sound that snow makes, a car coming. It would be Ken. He’d sit in the car and look at me, then he’d drive away. Not a word. Finally one day he told me to come see him at his office and he put me back on the team.

“He taught me a great lesson, no guff, toe the mark or else. Then we played in Humboldt and I got a hat trick. He might like you, but you still had to toe the mark.”

He played against the Komets on the Toledo Mercurys 1956-58, his first pro team, and then spent a long, starry career in the WHL. When the Seattle Totems put him on waivers at 36 and no one picked him up,

he came to the IHL and EHL for a couple of seasons. "I wanted people to know I was still interested," he says. He finished playing in 1974 and moved to managing (Dayton Gems) and then coaching, which included the Washington Capitals and the Jersey Devils. He is now a scout for the Boston Bruins on the west coast. He says proudly, "I've never had a real job in over forty years."

Tom did well in his year with the K's, making 56 points in 50 games and leading the scoring during the playoffs. He described his style: "I'd be scrambling around in front of the net, they weren't pretty goals. I'd hang around, there'd be a shot from the point, then a rebound and I'd knock it in. Somebody described me as 'the most dangerous scorer in the league—from the goal crease in.'"

He says he didn't have a lot of natural ability, but he had an intense desire to play, and so he worked hard, got some goals and made the all star teams. He says the best hockey advice he was ever given came from Guyle Fielder, who told him to be the first guy on the ice at practice and the last off. He followed it, and it worked. He also thinks the fact that he was a little bit wild made him a better player.

Turner Cup Season, 1972-1973

Fall 1972 marked the start of Boileau's second full season as coach. Most of the Amarillo players departed. Fitchner, Pearson and Billows returned, but Larry was traded after seven games. Fitchner said he was 'very sad' to be sent here for a second season.

A new goalie arrived to share the honors with Robbie Irons. Don Atchison was a big rookie. "He seemed to flounder around," said Reincke, and Robbie played most of the games, but they ended up with similar GAAs, around 2.90.

The younger players were very aware of the 'old steadies': Cal, Pembroke, Irons and, coming back to the team after six years away, Chick Balon. "They were not policemen," said Ray Brownlee. "When you arrived, you met them and you knew it was good to have them here. Consistency is important in an organization. Pembroke was so easy going. He handled guys but didn't go further than he had to."

It was very much Marc's team, and his coaching made the difference. "This was the closest team I played on," said Fitchner, "We were on a mission, playing for each other. We were peaking. Marc was personable, flexible and tough. He had his own ideas, that amounted to team building, although back then there wasn't a name attached to it. We

had a theme song, 'Allouette,' we sang it in the dressing room. We were all looking forward and we all bought into it."

"It was close knit," agreed Brownlee, "It was a unit, on and off the ice. The wives were instrumental in the team. The coaching was team oriented. Marc involved himself with the players. He was there for the parties, he was one of the guys but you never forgot he was the boss. We had so much respect for him and for the work. We wanted to work. None of us were all-stars.⁵ He took twenty guys and made a team. We all had our job."

Monday was Red Lion Day. Tuesday meant bowling. All the players went, and the wives. The idea was that playing together away from the rink helped link everyone together. "We needed that Monday after playing Friday, Saturday, Sunday," said Fitchner. "We noticed Robbie wore the same pants every week and we started referring to them as 'Robbie's bowling pants,' so then he made sure he always wore them," laughs Ray. One weekend, the party Sunday night went on a little too long. It was during a scoring slump, too. Marc made the Monday skate mandatory, although the players were green around the gills. "He had no pity on us. It was one of the few times that guys grumbled."

On some teams, there'd be a line between the single and married guys, but not here. Ron Ulliyot was an older guy at 25. His wife, Kate, played 'mother hen' to the younger players, which was appreciated.

The tone of the team came down to the coaching. "That day to day stuff comes back to coaching. No other coach was Marc's caliber at getting the best out of guys," said Brownlee. "We knew we needed each other. There were two goalies, a system in place, a scorer, a backchecker, we pulled together." And what if a slump happens? "The forward players must be self-critical. Only you know what's making you tick. Are you working hard enough? That may be what matters. You have to have the will to focus and to keep going."

The team ended with a 48-23-3 record, topping the south division of the IHL after trailing Dayton for much of the year, and heading the league. This championship was the first trophy they had won in seven years. Wayne Ego led the team scoring race with 94 points, followed by Brian Walker with 71 and Dean Sheremeta and Jeff Ablett with 66 each. Pembroke and Ego were voted MVP by their teammates.

⁵ Marc Boileau was the all-star team's coach that year, the only Komet contribution to the team.

The K's faced the Flint Generals, who had topped the north division, in the semifinals. Two days before the series started, Flint and Fort Wayne had a makeup game which the K's won 7-2.

In the first game of the series, Flint went down 9-0. Ablett had a hat trick and Irons the shutout. Wayne Ego had been flattened in the first period—by D'Arcy Keating. He just shrugged and said "I've had a couple of leg injuries this season and both resulted from being hit by my teammates. Terry [Pembroke] gave me the best check I got all season just a few games ago." The real centerpiece of the evening was a frolic starring Bob Fitchner.

Laurie Yaworski had played a few games with Dayton earlier in the season and was now playing a few games with Flint. Fitchner had played against him in junior in Canora, Saskatchewan, when Laurie was a star. "If they scored 14 goals, he'd have 12 of them," says Bob, "He was supposed to be the next Fran Huck, he was little, too." They had tangled during a Komets-Gems game earlier in the season, and toward the end of the third period in this game, Yaworski slashed Fitchner from behind. He then hid behind a linesman and refused to fight.

Fitchner, inflamed, skated over to the Flint bench and challenged the whole team. They hesitated, but young Rod Cox accepted. A rookie with 20 points and 160 PIM, he was trying to make a place for himself. Gallmeier said, "It was a near fatal mistake." A fan who was there refers to him as 'that poor kid,' but Jimmy Pearson said, "Cox is the only guy they got with guts," and Fitch himself called him 'a gummy kid.'

Of course, both benches emptied and even the goalies went at it. Irons injured his hand, which prevented him from playing most of the rest of the series. A Flint journalist said that Fitchner would not have dared make the challenge if the Generals' tough guy Doug Kerslake had been present. It followed that Fitch and Kerslake would get together in the next game, and Fitch broke Kerslake's nose, which settled the issue. Gary Gardner remarked, "You seldom see the two big men on the teams square off. Kerslake got in the first punch and Fitchner crumpled and then came back. He was the finest fighter ever to put on Komet skates."

The first game brawl remains significant in everyone's memory. "That skirmish set the tone for the series," said Fitchner. As in the previous year, when Bob's fight with Kelly drew the K's together, his challenge to the Flint bench electrified an already strong team.

Again it should be said that Fitchner dislikes being remembered as a fighter. "He wasn't a fighter outside Fort Wayne," says Ray

Brownlee, "He was put in that role here, but it was not his natural role." He remained 'the heart and soul of that team,' according to Terry Reincke, "He led by example and that's what makes captains." Fan Neal Colvin agrees, "Probably the most telling thing is that Bob was team captain that year," and Irons calls him 'the most impactful player in one season.' Fitchner later spent nine seasons playing in the WHA and NHL.

The K's went on to win the series 4 games to 1. Brownlee scored the winner in the second game and Atchison, brought forward after Irons' injury, shone. The third game was a thrashing, 8-1 for the K's. IHL commissioner Beagan attended the game to present the Huber Trophy and a fan shouted, "Do you see any all-stars down there now?"

The winning goal was scored by Terry Thomson. The winning goals for the three playoff games, scored by Fitchner, Brownlee and Thomson, had all come from former Brandon Wheat Kings players.

The fourth game went into overtime and resulted in a 6-5 Flint win. The K's outshot the Generals 70-38. The fifth game gave Atchison a shutout, 5-0, which ended the series at 4 games to 1. Sheremeta scored as the third period opened, and the goal has a story. "I was scoring. The other team had two guys on me. They shadowed me, slashed me. Marc said, 'Sit out, Dino,' so I did for two periods. The other team were unsure what was going on. The third period came, Marc sent me out. I was healthy as hell and scored right away."

In the finals, the K's defeated the Port Huron Wings 4 games to 0 to win the Turner Cup for the third time. As the series started, Irons and Atchison were named joint winners of the Norris Trophy as best goal-tenders in the IHL that season. It was a triumph for them both, showing that Irons had made a comeback after his worst year (1971-72) and young Atchison had proved he could make it. Gallmeier later referred to Atchison's performance in the playoffs as 'miraculous' and Ron Ullyot said, "He hadn't been doing well and he stood on his head and played well." Reincke gave some of the credit to the defensemen, too. "The players rallied in front of Atchison defensively and overwhelmed Flint. Then he came to the charge."

Despite fine performances by individual players, the wins were team efforts. Bob Miller seemed to be right there when needed and late acquisition Hrycuik led the team in goals. After the third win, the team had a wait until the fourth game. "Sitting around, we might have gotten stale. We practiced in Flint," said Fitchner. "We had huge fan support.

Maybe 600-800 fans came to Port Huron for the last game.” It was quiet on the bus, with no card playing, Cal reported. ‘because we knew.’

Following the four game sweep, the K’s assembled in the dressing room. Ego, as expected, announced his retirement from hockey. Boileau asked, “What do you think of the All-Star coach and team now?” and Fitchner responded, “We had 18 All-Stars.” “We could have beat an NHL team that night,” said Cal.

On the bus home, they linked arms and sang ‘Alouette.’

“In ’72, we felt bad. We knew we were as good as Port Huron,” said Ron Ulliyot, “Then in ’73, with a bounce of the puck, we proved it.” “We accomplished a lot that year,” said Fitchner. “When you win the Stanley Cup or the Turner Cup, you proved you’re the best. I won the cup in the WHA also. It has more prestige but it wasn’t more satisfying. If it hadn’t been for Fort Wayne, I might not have had the chance to play for eleven years.” Ray Brownlee commented, “It was our best year in hockey. We still have close ties.”

Robbie Irons

“A friend had a set of goalie gloves, I could catch the ball [it was ball hockey],” said Robbie Irons, “So I wanted to play goal. I was always good, I was small and agile.” Thus began a distinguished netminding career.

Robbie graduated from high school in graphic arts, then played for the Kitchener Rangers (OHA), who arranged an apprenticeship for him at the same time. He would work all day, then practice, and did well.

He first came to Fort Wayne in November 1967. “The weirdest thing was, I had no equipment. The junior team kept the equipment, I had new skates and mask. The Komets told me there’d be no problem, there were some spare new gloves. I had a week to practice, three or four days with the new pads and gloves. My first game was against Des Moines, I was so nervous. I got a shutout, 2-0.” After a good first season, he left in 1968 for St. Louis.

Scotty Bowman was coaching in St. Louis and had a finely-tuned arrangement with his goalies. He had two of the finest, Glenn Hall and Jacques Plante, but both were older. To conserve their energy, he kept a third in reserve. When the team travelled, one goalie went ahead the day before, whether it was Hall or Plante, to rest before the game. That left one behind to play and the third man as backup.

The backups came from the team in Kansas City. There were three goalies there, each of whom took on one-third of the season in St. Louis. Robbie was one of the three. "One of the starting goalies was ahead of the team all the time. I would be practicing, as the backup. I spent the first third of the season in St. Louis." In the end, he played only a single game with the St. Louis Blues, but it was a famous occasion. Hall was thrown out of the game and Robbie, as backup, was sent in. However, Plante was in the stands and Bowman had him dress and then sent him out, to the fury of the opposing team. The result was an NHL ruling that only two goalies could dress for a game, and play—making Robbie a part of NHL history.

In 1970-71, twelve players were dropped from the Kansas City Blues, Robbie included. Unemployed, he was heading for Pepsi (who had always wanted him) when he called Ken Ullyot. He was told he could play immediately. He replaced Dan Stephens, who had played only two games, and was paired with Jim Keough. Robbie had a terrific year, with a GAA of 2.65 in 31 games.

He calls the next season 'my worst year.' Boileau's working arrangement with Pittsburgh meant that they sent players here. The Amarillo team folded and several guys migrated, including Paul Hoganson, a goalie. By the end of the year, Robbie was the second goalie. "[Paul] played 60% of the games. He had a pro contract and did well. At the end of the year, he left for the AHL." Hoganson played for Hershey the following season, then for various WHA and PHL teams until 1979.

"Then some kids came," said Robbie, "Ablett, Walker, Atchison." Don Atchison was away from home for the first time. He was an unorthodox goalie, and Irons had a lot to prove because of his bad year. During the famous game when Bob Fitchner challenged the Flint bench, Robbie broke his hand hitting Merlin Jenner, the Flint goalie, in the resulting brawl. Don had to step up and he did well. The following season he attended Pittsburgh's training camp, was sent back here and had a bad time. In February 1974, Gallmeier wrote, "This season he's been more like an open door." He was gone partway through the year. "I don't think he had enough drive," says Robbie. "I always thought I had more to lose than he did." Don spent part of a season in Johnstown (NAHL) before retiring. In 1974-75, Robbie tore ligaments during a game in Saginaw. There was a pileup in front of the net and two players fell on him. He was out for the rest of the season, and when he returned

to training camp that fall he was skeptical, but he did all right. He had six seasons more to play.

Although Robbie has remarked, "When you're a goalie you can stop anything," he says his favorite maxim, from Ken Dryden, is "One goalie will stop a puck. Another won't. There is no perfect way to stop a puck." Robbie agrees, but says, "The bottom line is still stopping the puck." Thinking about Dryden's maxim, Robbie compares Hall and Plante, different in personality and style. Plante was a position goalie, Hall all over the place, but both were good. The end result is the same.

Gregg Pilling's view on goalies is that they have their own ideas and aren't swayed by outside opinions. "It takes a different kind of person, strong-willed, unafraid. If you can't stand pain, don't be a goalie."

Robbie was glad he played during the two-goalie era. "The game got faster and there was more travel, more games. They needed two. Our trips weren't so bad, 72 games. If I started on Friday and was good, I wanted to play Saturday and the other guy would play Sunday, or vice versa." Asked about a rivalry between the two, he said, "Most goalies respect each other. There would be some competition obviously, and the one who's playing better will play."

Asked about the various teams and shooters he faced, Robbie said, "I was lucky against Dayton, Des Moines and Toledo, but I had trouble against Port Huron and Muskegon. Gary Ford and Lennie Fontaine were nifty with the puck." Ford, of Muskegon, had a number of 100+ points seasons, including 141 in 1972-73. Lennie, of the Flags, had 112 in 1975-76. "I was always confident against Dennis Desrosiers," Robbie says, "He had an unusually high slap shot that I knew."

Robbie's dad bought him his first mask at 14. He used one similar to Terry Sawchuk's, made by Lefty Wilson. Then a friend in Toronto who was both a goalie and a boat manufacturer made one he liked. "I cut out the eyes with a file, one got a little cracked," he says. He wore it white for a year, and then Colin Lister had it painted blue and orange, the Komet colors. He wore it for the rest of his career.

He'd take a walk after a small steak at noon, and then begin to focus for the game. His intense concentration is remembered by all his teammates, and also his need to vomit before the game. "And between periods, too," he admits. "Like *The Exorcist*," says one player. For coach Moose Lallo's first game, Moose was standing nearby in the dressing

room when Robbie started to puke. Moose called to Joe Franke, "Get that Gismal stuff [Pepto Bismal], Robbie's sick."

It was the intensity of his playing that was the key to his success. "He was a real competitor," said Gerry Randall, "It could be 8-1 and he's still playing to win." "I never saw him smile at a hockey game," remembered Terry Pembroke, "Except the revolving goalies game. He was laughing that day." Ron Ulliyot observed, "He was a great skater with a great glove. He was very intense before games, starting to get focused. On the bus, he'd get mad about jokes. Goalies have to do that more than anyone. He took it hard when he didn't do well. In practice he tried even harder." Dave Norris said, "I sat beside him in the dressing room. The mistake I made was moving. Watching him focus got you ready to play." And Terry Pembroke finished, "He gave you every bit of himself. You tell him he's playing tomorrow, he'd start puking today."

As time went by he became influential with the younger players. "He could tell a defenseman or winger if they made a mistake," said Randall. Gregg Pilling said Robbie would tell him about plays other teams had from what he'd seen on the ice.

"You've got to work from goaltending out," in building a team, according to Chuck Bailey. Ron Ulliyot agrees, "I've had teams as a coach where two goalies were hurt and there was no good replacement. It's crushing to a team to see soft goalies going in." Robbie, like Chuck Adamson, was a small, quick goaltender. "Things are different now," Ron says, "Goalies are bigger and don't move so much. Back then, they had a standup style, they were small, with good hands. It's a hockey tradition to have a small guy in the nets." Dick Zimmerman said, "[Robbie] exemplifies what a goalie should be. He kicked the puck to the corner, not in front, he knows every detail."

Robbie had his moments in the spotlight. At the 1973 all-star game, he stopped all 21 shots against him. In the early 80s, as his career was ending, he starred in an ad for the Wolf Corporation, who made mattresses and box springs. Their illustration showed Robbie, fast asleep on a Wolf mattress in full hockey gear.

He retired in 1981, although colleagues felt he could have played another year or two. "Pepsi was after him," one said. He's still with Pepsi, and broadcasts as the color man with Bob Chase. "He's good at describing it," said one fan. Few would disagree with Dubchak's summary. "He's a real star."

Stitches and Bruises

Injuries are as much a part of hockey as the puck itself. The players accept this and tend to shrug off the effects, although they continue to feel them in later life. "I got hurt every year," said Len Thomson, "Till I came here, that's half the problem with moving up."

It was important to keep going. The shifts on the ice, perhaps a minute, may seem long if you are going as hard as you can. If you are injured, they seem even longer. "There's no time to be off when you're injured, you play hurt. You have to be disciplined and self-demanding," said Kelly Hurd. Anyway, Ron Leef observed, "If you're out with an injury, you don't feel part of the team."

There's a pride in knowing you can carry on regardless. "You sacrifice your body by blocking shots. Little things like that make you winners. You do the things you could," said Steve Fletcher, "You didn't think about the injury or pain—whatever we had to do, we did." He finishes by saying, "If we'd lost some toes, we'd have just told Joe to put toilet paper in the skate."

He illustrates this with a story about himself: In the same year as John Anderson's heroic game, Fletch had a hurt knee and played with a brace. He had a breakaway, went back to take a wrist shot and his leg gave way. He went down on the ice and had to crawl to the boards to pull himself up. "You did what you had to, despite the pain. Anyway, some people take pain differently."

Martin Burgers wondered if that were still true. "In the past, we played when we should not have played, which hurt us. Now the players see themselves as a business and they're not going to hurt their business by playing when they shouldn't."

As for the suggestion that modern equipment, being larger and harder, causes injuries, Ian Boyce doesn't think so. "No, I will not blame injuries on the equipment. The guys are bigger and harder than before, too." As for the players' attitude to injuries, he says, "You're trained to deal with them. Then when you stop playing, you have to retrain your brain, like a muscle, to see injuries as ordinary people do."

It was the custom for the home team to have a doctor on duty to care for injuries to both sets of players. For many years, the team of Marvin Priddy and Jerry Stuckey did the honors, sometimes with both of them at the Coliseum together. They were Vi Ulliyot's medical men and were asked to be the team doctors. "We enjoyed the hockey and the

camaraderie,” Dr. Priddy says, “We were there so much, my wife said we had no social life but hockey.”

Assessing his work there, he says, “There were not as many fractures as you’d expect. Finger fractures were the most common, and they’d go back and play afterward. The most common things were lacerations, we’d average three a game, and there’d be one at least. The players didn’t like freezing and we didn’t use it much. We’d tell them not to go on—I remember Emil Gilles was injured and I told him not to go on, but he did. Most of them were tough, they’d go on.” Cal Purinton said he’d had 300 stitches in his face, “but you don’t pay any attention.”

The trainers could deal with the minor cuts and muscular problems. “The guys were always cut, but not so many muscle rips like they get now,” said Johnny Bloom of the 60s. “We’d slap on some antibiotics and a bandage and send them on. Some guys got more attention than others.” George Polinuk said that bruises and bumps might cause trouble, the toughest being the charley horse. “One year Len Ronson got such a bad one, his thigh was like a rock. We took him to the chiropractor because we couldn’t help it.”

Doug Rigler had three concussions. “I collided with a teammate for the first one. It was because of my skating style, slouched over head first,” he says, “I was in the hospital for a week and my nose was broken. I got another during a game, hit in the face by a stick during a cross check. My timing was so far off after that I had to relearn the fundamentals, but the coach was good to me. The third happened during his Komet years and required a week off, “and the coach gave me a hard time about it.” Dr. David Burns, the team dentist, gave Doug and Wally Schreiber a new anticoncussion appliance to try.

The most common device Dr. Burns has had to make for hockey players is a mouth guard, usually a lower mouth guard, “because the players say an upper guard will interfere with their breathing.” The mouth guard protects the jaw and the cervicle bone. It fits over the teeth and is made to a preferred thickness, 3-4mm, or as thick as 6-8mm. It’s important there is no space between the teeth and the guard.

Dr. Burns has been the team dentist since 1977. He has had to make a permanent bridge for players whose teeth were knocked out—he mentions Carey Lucyk and Dan Bonar in particular—and says that with ordinary folks who lose a tooth, an implant is a possibility. Not for hockey players, however, because the chance of having the same injury again is high. With an implant, this type of injury would damage the

gums and make further repairs more difficult. "They have a removable bridge installed now, which they don't wear during the games. They can have the implant after they've retired from hockey," he says. Back in the 80s, Dan Ryder brought him a tooth which had been knocked out in the playoffs. Now, there might be a chance of putting it back, but the technology did not exist then to use the original tooth.

Doug Johnston's comment on teeth was, "You got your permanent teeth, everybody did, because you lost your first ones in junior." Which is probably what happened to Pierre Gagné. He was checked during an exhibition game in Houston in 1961, his teeth flew out and he was crawling on the ice trying to pick them up. They kept slipping away. He was 21 at the time.

Bill Orban broke his wrist while he was here, reports Cal, he could play, but he says regretfully, 'he couldn't fight with it.'

Gerry Randall had a mouth wound that required forty stitches, acquired during a game with Columbus. Alton White was taking a shot as the whistle blew. Gerry moved the wrong way and the puck connected to his mouth. "When you get hit like that," he says, "The first thing you think is, are my teeth okay?" He got stitched up, but had to go back to play although he continued bleeding, because Irons was injured. The crowd's perception was that Al had shot after the whistle on purpose and reacted accordingly. Ted Wright jumped him and a general brawl resulted. "All I knew was that somebody was on my back," says White.

In his last season, Merv Dubchak broke his wrist. 'without doing a wrong thing on my part.' The break was a disaster for him. He commented about injuries, "I kept most of my aches and pains to myself. There's enough people complaining in this world."

Paul Shmyr stopped a slapshot with his foot. The solution to keep him playing was to freeze it before games and between periods. "The freezing stopped working," he said, "So they were carrying me on and off the bus." The broken bone was described as a hairline fracture, but Paul laughs, "Oh sure, you could drive a truck through it. I'm surprised Ulfyot let them take an x-ray. They might find something wrong and you wouldn't be able to play."

Dr. Priddy describes a pain which Robbie Laird had in his ankle. An x-ray revealed no fracture, but the pain continued. They took a second x-ray and referred him to an orthopedist, but still nothing showed up. When the pain was still there after three months, a third x-ray finally showed the fracture. Meantime, Robbie had continued to play.

Lloyd Maxfield's clavicle had torn loose and wouldn't heal. In the end Dr. Priddy said they had to cut some of it off for it to reattach itself properly. It did not affect the movement but the arm was not as strong as it had been.

Martin Burgers revealed an unusual treatment: "When you broke your nose, you'd put tampons up there so you could go on playing."

Ken Tarnow played with the K's in 1973-74, scoring a hat trick on 20 February 1974. The next season he was in Flint. His leg hurt and when it was investigated, it was found he had a broken fibula which dated back to his time in Fort Wayne. No x-rays had been taken at the time and he had continued playing. Gallmeier quoted him saying, "Sure it hurts. And it has been hurting for some time. But the x-rays show it is healing. It can't hurt any more than it has already, so I'll just keep playing."

Part of injury avoidance was keeping in shape, of course. The players often lost weight at training camp, and would also lose pounds during a game. "I lost ten pounds the first day of practice," said Ted Wright on his return after an absence. Len Thomson remembered, "You go to training camp not in shape, work your butt off for two days, lose ten pounds, then you get your edge back."

The general hockey player's attitude to injury can be summed up by a remark made by Roger Maisonneuve. Len Thomson was being examined by the doctor for a suspected broken finger on 16 February 1963. As Roger walked by, he said, "Aw, just cut it off, doc."

Ron Ullyot

Ron Ullyot grew up at the Coliseum. He was twelve when his father took over the Komets and for most of the next twenty-five years he was attached to the organization, one way or another.

"We had a rink next door in Prince Albert and I always wanted to be a player," he says, "We'd play hockey, 25 guys a side, in -35° weather." In Fort Wayne, Ron and his friends Gary Myers and Jack Cole would go to the Coliseum after school. If the Komets were not there, they'd play, but sometimes 'there would be figure skaters in the way.' If the K's were practicing, they were able to join in. "The players would make us laugh, and Reggie, Len and Lionel would show us tricks to help our game." Stubby remembers Ron as 'one of the nicest kids you'd want to meet.' He says the young players were 'one of the boys' as they grew up with the team, and of course Ron and his friends became better

players, "after all, when you've got kids 16-17 spending all their time on the ice..."

They worked in the concession stands, as stick boys for the K's and Ron's job was stocking up the crates of Pepsi for the players after a game. He says, "It was a great way to grow up."

Gary Myers observes: "When I was in junior high and high school in Fort Wayne, the Coliseum was my playground. Every day after school, at around 3:00pm, I would go there and skate and play hockey. When the Komets were practicing, Ken Ullyot let me work out with the team. The experience I gained with the team made a big difference. I later received a hockey scholarship at Colorado College. I practiced with the Komets from 1961 through 1965. It was probably the golden age of Komet hockey in Fort Wayne—Ed Long, Len Thomson, Lionel Repka, John Goodwin. On occasion, I traveled with the team as the stick boy. What I remember most was Eddie Long on the right-wing and Len Thomson at center. Eddie was the hustler and Len, the playmaker. Together they made for fabulous hockey. They were great times."

Ron's first tryout was as a goalie. There was a trainer who wanted the goalie's job, but he was not successful and quit in anger. Ron filled in. Ron's college career was at the University of Michigan, where he had a scholarship, which Chuck Adamson helped him obtain. Ron came to the Komets training camp and asks, "Why would I want to play any other place?"

He describes himself as a good positional defensive player, passing the puck to those who could score. He is described as 'not flashy, but a player who used what he had to advantage.' "He wasn't a star, he was a regular player," said his coach Moe Bartoli. "He got the job done, but you don't notice him out there." Also, the analytical and planning skills which would characterize his coaching were already evident. "He worked harder than anyone to be on the team, he deserved to be there," said Reincke. "Always conditioning, extra practice, what a team player."

Inevitably there were questions about the fact that the coach was his father. There are two sides to this, one suggesting that he had it easy and the other, just the opposite. Ron Burman said, "My dad coached me in minor. It gets touchy at times. It's gotta be tough." Many people said that Ken was not easy on Ron. "He took as much crap from Ken as anybody," observed Chase. "It was a burden for him," said one player.

Ron remembers one difficult occasion in Des Moines. In overtime, Ron put the puck right on the opposing player's stick and the

guy walked right in. In the dressing room, Ken tore into him, but the next night Ron scored the winning goal.

Ron says he didn't hear the remarks about his having it easy from the crowd, if there were any. "If you're focused, you don't hear that stuff," he says. Once, another player said something and Ken advised him he needed to do something about it. A fight started and Ron found himself beside the guy, so he hit him. He also told him why. He got a penalty and then the other player beat him up, but he never said it again.

"I learned hockey from my dad not only on the ice, but at home. He never pressured me to be a hockey player, it was what I wanted. If I wasn't his son, I might have moved on, but I didn't want to go elsewhere to play. I wanted to play with my heroes and my dad, Len, Eddie, Reggie." So there was a balance.

Terry Pembroke was with Ron throughout his playing career and as he began to coach. He says, "Ron is an exceptional human being who had to carry his legacy on his shoulders. He was a smart hockey man who should have started his coaching here. He earned his way. He wasn't flash, but a dedicated hockey player. And he played better when we were on the road and he didn't have to play in front of his mother."

Ron and Bob Fitchner did a lot of penalty killing together and Bob benefited from Ron's quest for better technical skills. "He tried putting weights on the skates to improve skating. They fell off in practice, but they were a good idea," he says. "He was always teaching hockey." Ron says that one of his skills was 'survival' and that Tom McVie gave him a good piece of hockey advice: "Arrive in the corner first with ill humor."

In the 1974-75 season, Ron starred in an eye-catching ad for Rogers Men's Formal Wear. The photo showed him standing in the goal crease watching two players fighting. He is dressed in a tuxedo and dress shirt, and wearing skates.

After a season as assistant coach to Ralph Keller, Ron moved on to coach in Columbus and Port Huron. "Sometimes you get to pay back," said Tom McVie. "So we helped Ron get the coaching job in Port Huron. He knew the game as well as anyone, and I've been around hockey all my life. He would come to the Capitals training camp in Hershey later, and help out every day with the physical things. He was good at those." Ron says McVie's coaching advice to him was, "If you hold a bird in the hand too tight, you'll kill it. If it's not tight enough, it will fly away. You have to know when to have rules and when to have fun."

Ron came to coach the Komets for four seasons, 1981-1985. He was interested in physical conditioning in a way that was new to hockey, and would test the players. He would read about new things and try them out, and he had a way of being able to find players in places no one else might think of. Inevitably he was compared to his father, and their methods were seen as very similar. "He was too tough on them, and he always fined them heavily," said Colin Lister. He also had a curfew: "we had it in junior, too, but we didn't need it as adults," said Martin Burgers. "We ignored it." "He liked a tough team, he liked aggressive players," said John Baldassari, "Which is interesting because he wasn't one. He was interested in physical play."

Ron consciously used Ken's methods. "Dad was good at demonstrating a fundamental, he would paint a picture. For example, talking about passing, he'd line up guys on the blue line and make them see the puck could go faster than anyone." Ron's Komets won the regular season league championship in 1983-84 and finished in the semifinals of the Turner Cup all four years.

"He was the most technical of the coaches I'd had to that point," said Robbie Laird, "He designed systems, and I was thinking of coaching, so I listened carefully. I used his ideas when I came to coach. The thing about Ron, he was a student of the game."

Even the players who might have reservations about his coaching style had none about Ron personally: quiet, steady and a nice guy. He went on to coach in Indianapolis, and then left hockey to go into business. He now lives in Florida, and he says, "I'd be a better coach now than fifteen years ago. Life's experiences make the difference."

The Keller Years

After the Turner Cup victory, many players went on to higher things. Although Boileau began the 1973-74 season in Fort Wayne, he was offered a chance to coach in the NHL in Pittsburgh in December, and left. Former player Ted Wright, who was working in the Komet office, took over the coaching.

"Ted was in a tough spot," said Irons, "Succeeding Marc, those lost players and he didn't have the connections to get more." Ralph Keller replaced Ted in November 1974.

Keller had just completed a twenty-year playing career, half of it with the Hershey Bears of the AHL. He had played junior in Prince Albert under Ken Ulliyot.

Robbie Laird said, "I liked him. He had our respect because of his past experience, but he came at a tough time after the year's slow start. The team had a lot of characters, it was hard to manage them. Terry MacDougall and he had some trouble, classic clashes, and Ralph wasn't good as a disciplinarian. There were curfew violations." By this time, Ullyot saw the players at negotiation time, but did not have much more regular involvement with them. He watched practices and games.

"Ralph had not coached before," observed Dave Norris, "It was typical, he couldn't transfer playing skills. Sometimes players don't understand why they were great, it's just natural. I was a student of the game. I had to learn how to play and went to power skating school every year. Other coaches have trouble like this, [George] Armstrong understood talent and could match up players, but could not teach. But Templeton did and then Pilling. Ralph mostly did conditioning, skating, some puck handling and shot drills. There was little strategy, there were no systems then. The second year he got better, he was growing with the game and learning, but he'd had enough."

Terry Reincke says Ralph had a concoction for playoff time. It consisted of eggs, orange juice and crushed ice. "We'd whip this for the players. It was psychological as much as anything."

"We were short on talent," said Ron Ullyot, "No coach could have done much with what we had." Norris said part of the problem was the makeup of the team. The affiliation with Pittsburgh continued, half the team was pro, half amateur. The pros had signed with an NHL team, the amateurs had not. They made considerably less money, which Norris calls 'living expenses only.' Their future was also uncertain.

Norris' line in his first year, 1975-76, included Sid Veysey and Dan O'Driscoll. Sid was a rookie, described by Norris as 'lean, scrawny and quietly tough.' Dave compares Dan to Guy Lafleur, saying he could score from anywhere, a talented stick handler who could shoot sailing down the right wing. "Sid would set up, Dan would score and I'd be the tough guy. It was a fun line in an intimidating environment. We stood tall, all young, all rookies."

The first line that year had Terry McDougall, Robbie Laird and D'Arcy Keating. The second was Brian Shmyr, Jeff Ablett and John Sheridan. The veterans were Irons, Terry Thomson (out most of the year with a shoulder separation), Pembroke and Ken Wright, who arrived from Toledo at the end of the year. The assistant coach was Ron Ullyot.

who had moved over from playing. "He was a big help during practices," said Sid, "One on one with players, practicing faceoffs."

By now, the K's had an affiliation with the Vancouver Canucks. Veysey, Bob McNeice and Marc Gaudreault were sent here by the Canucks. "I was disappointed when I was sent to Tulsa," says Sid, "But felt better when I came here. Keller was one of the guys, respected because of his abilities."

Sid remembers a hat trick, the third goal of which came on a penalty shot. "I had a breakaway and was tripped. I got the penalty shot and won." Sid liked to practice shooting, and would stay after practice with the goalie to shoot 20-25 pucks. He was often the last man off the ice. He arrived in the dressing room one day to find that Ralph was waiting to make an announcement. Sid had been name IHL Rookie of the Year. "I was pleased in later years," he says, "I beat Stan Jonathan by one vote. He played in Boston later."

Ivan Prediger was coaching in Dayton and remembers the end of the 1975-76 season. There was one game left, of no meaning. He spoke to Bill Riley, one of his tough guys about a Komet. "We've got a seven game series coming up. You'll have to fight him 4-5 times. Are you ready?" Riley said, "Watch me!" "And they went at it," says Ivan, "And they did fight all those times." The Komet was Ken Wright.

1975-76 saw the start of a new Three Star Award. The press decided at each game who were the stars, similar to NHL games. Points were awarded and the player with the most won the award at the end of the regular season. The first winner was Robbie Irons.

Cal Purinton says one essential thing in coaching is 'no favoritism.' Dave Norris observes that some coaches have to have a whipping boy, and Keller's whipping boy was D'Arcy Keating. "D'Arcy was the strongest player in the league. He had a powerful, great shot but he also had a lazy streak. He could change the outcome of a game if he wanted, if he played physical, which he might not do. He was a sleeping giant." "And don't wake him up," adds Pembroke.

Norris continues, "Ralph used the wrong strategy, belittling or harassment. Encouragement and motivation would have been better. Every coach had the same problem with D'Arcy. Gregg Pilling would always encourage, give rewards. He might get pissed but not belittle."

Laird says, "D'Arcy had a long fuse and it wasn't in his personality to be aggressive." Mike Penasse used a single word, bulldozer. Rob Tudor called him 'a workhorse along the wall' and said,

"Some games you'd have to hit him with a frying pan, then he was a force." D'Arcy's mild manner led the other players to call him Dad.

In Bob Chase's opinion, D'Arcy 'didn't know how tough he was. Shaking hands with him was like putting your hand in a vise.' He says that D'Arcy and Terry McDougall were friends. "Carlo Torresan from Muskegon jumped Dougie and D'Arcy hit Carlo one in the chest and put him out with one hit." As for D'Arcy's size, "his helmet looked like a peanut on a watermelon." D'Arcy was only six feet tall, but he was broad.

Gregg Pilling summed up: "D'Arcy is the kind of guy who costs coaches their jobs. So much potential and didn't know it. Imposing to play against. I wanted him to dominate people. He was a smart player and a hell of a shot, but he just wanted to play." Fan Gary Gardner said, "I wish I could have taken Robbie Laird's desire and put it in D'Arcy Keating's body."

The 70s were a time when everyone became more aware of Russian hockey through games with touring teams. Spartak, a secondary team, came here. "The Reds won 7-4, I scored and Dan," said Veysey. "Their equipment was even older and shabbier than ours, but they were great athletes. Their style was different, not as much shooting, more passing and cycling back in your own zone, very different from us."

"We battled all year in Dayton," says Sid. "They had Stan Jonathan, Bill Riley, Gordie Lane, seven or eight guys who liked to fight. Dave Norris would get in a fight with Jonathan every game. They fought our tough guys, Dave, Robbie Laird, D'Arcy, McNeice."

1976-77 was a big year for hockey, the year that the film *Slapshot* came out. Ron Ullyot summed it up as 'all the strange things that happen in minor hockey in an hour and a half.' Its depiction of minor-league hockey as a place of goons and buffoons has left a permanent impression. George Kotsopoulos says, "It was a pretty real picture of the IHL, especially earlier," and Joe Kastelic laughed, "We could have made five *Slapshot* pictures," based on his IHL life. Alton White commented. "The first time the Carlsons skated out on the ice with those glasses, we thought it was a Komet." Players talking about the early 80s in the IHL have referred to them as 'the *Slapshot* years.'

Veysey left and O'Driscoll was traded to Toledo. Dan had 72 points in 1975-76, so the trade might have been a surprise. "He was not an aggressive player," said Norris, "Not physical and he was underestimated. A lot of talent is overlooked because it's not aggressive

enough.” His new line partners were Ron Zanussi and Rob Tudor. “We were one of the best lines in the league that year,” he says. All three were in the top five scorers for the K’s, and their point total was 243. The leading scorer was Terry McDougall, with 103.

“We were the third line,” says Tudor, “But as the season went on we outscored them. We took some pressure off Laird, Keating and McDougall. Give Keller the credit for molding young guys, no pressure at first, then scope to develop.” He says that, “Fort Wayne was good for me. The beginning and the end is that it’s a great hockey town, the best I’ve found.”

They were all scrappers. Zanussi liked to create a little offensive space to move in. They fitted with a Komet tradition. A fan said, “I looked forward to seeing those guys—Bernie MacNeil, Fitchner, Laird. I’d rather see Zanussi or Tudor because there’s a chance something else will happen, a check, a confrontation, a sense of something happening.”

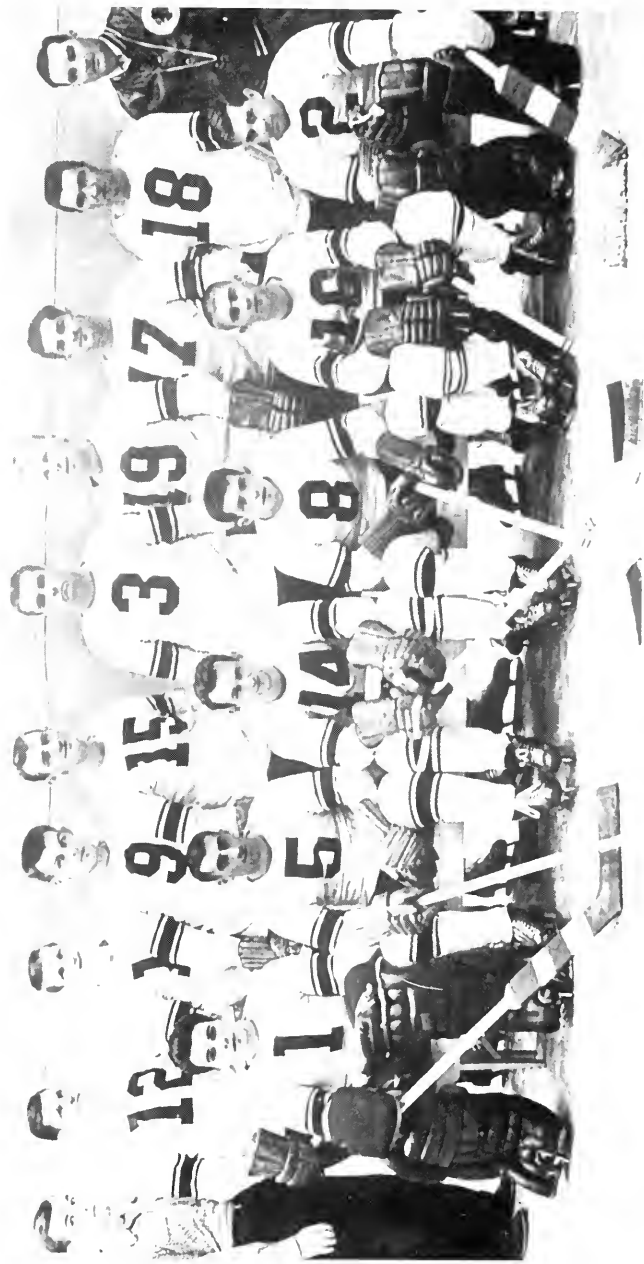
Zanussi and Tudor shared an apartment, and as Tudor says, ‘we were learning about each other off the ice too,’ which helps develop co-operation in play. Tudor characterises Ron as ‘quiet and confident’ but an older player says Zanussi was ‘very insecure. He felt he wasn’t going anywhere,’ perhaps as a result of being sent to Fort Wayne by the North Stars after being picked in round 3 of the NHL draft.

He gained respect and began scoring. People would feed him. “He’d come down the right side,” said Baldassari, “Someone would send the puck across and he’d beat the goalie on the right side. A slapshot like a bullet on the ice. Lots of his goals were like that.” Zanussi shared the Rookie of the Year honors with Garth MacGuigan of Muskegon and went on to an NHL career with Minnesota and Toronto.

Burly veteran left winger Terry Ewasiuk joined the K’s that year and Keller asked him to play defense. “I kept it simple,” he says. “Went back and passed to the forwards, played tough. Defensemen get in trouble trying to do too much.”

Neal Colvin remarks about this season, “The 76-77 year was fun because of an incredible rivalry with Toledo. Their semifinal playoff series was one the greatest I have seen, even though the K’s lost.” Toledo won 4 games to 1 in the semifinals.

Rob Tudor remembers clearly one Toledo game. His parents were visiting from Saskatchewan. Toledo was losing 5-1. Ian MacPhee, who earned 240 penalty minutes that season, came from the bench to take the faceoff with Tudor. “He had four tough guys with him,” Rob



1952-53 Kometes: front row: Jack Siemon, Vic DiMarco, Doug Houston, Paul Jago, Eddie Long, Stan Fogg

back row: Dick Alt, Jack Timmins, George Drysdale, Roman Besidowski, Puggy O'Brien, Len Wharton, Mike Buchanan, John Belisle, Eddie Calhoun, Alex Wood.



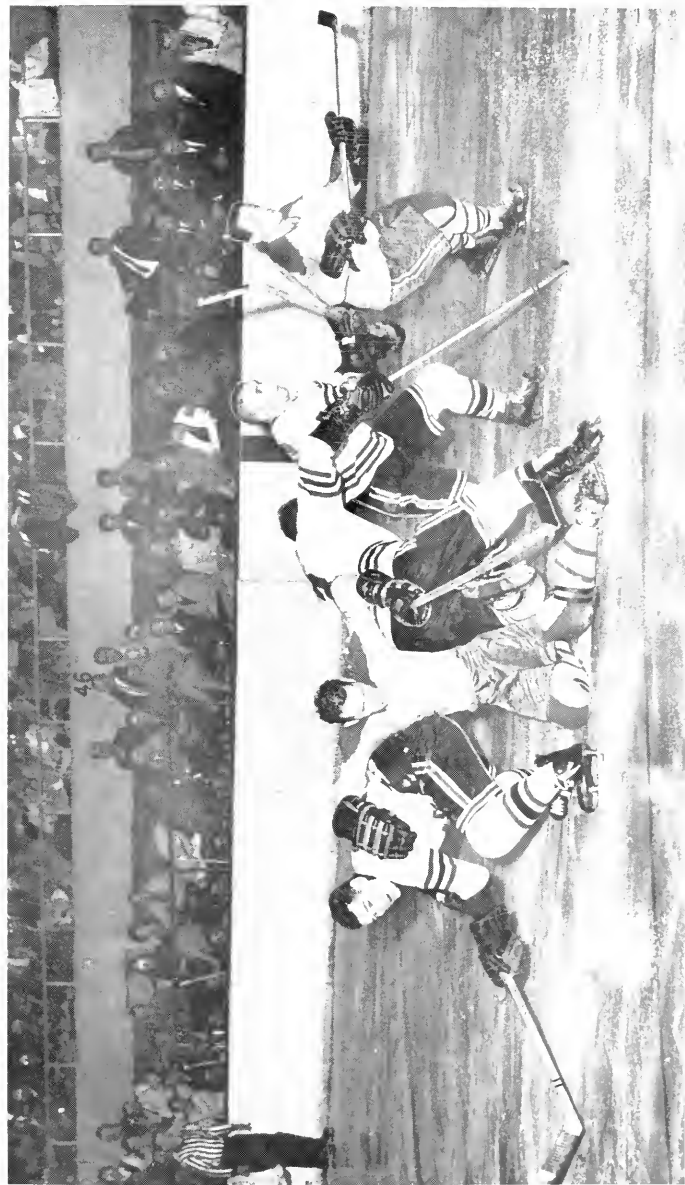
left. They each scored a hat trick: Eddie Long, Jacques Gagné, Len Thomson
right. Bob Chase broadcasting



Victory in first round of playoffs against Indianapolis, 1958-59; in front, Art Stone (suit), Glenn Ramsay, Len Thomson; middle, George Polinuk, Bob McCusker, Roger Maisonneuve, Shorty Melanchuk, Len Ronson, Norm Waslawski, Bill Mitchell, Gus Braumberger; rear, Larry McLaren, Eddie Long, Duane Rupp.



above: Eddie Long, Ivan Walmsley, Joe Kastelic, George Drysdale, ca. 1954; below: Andy Voykin and Con Madigan



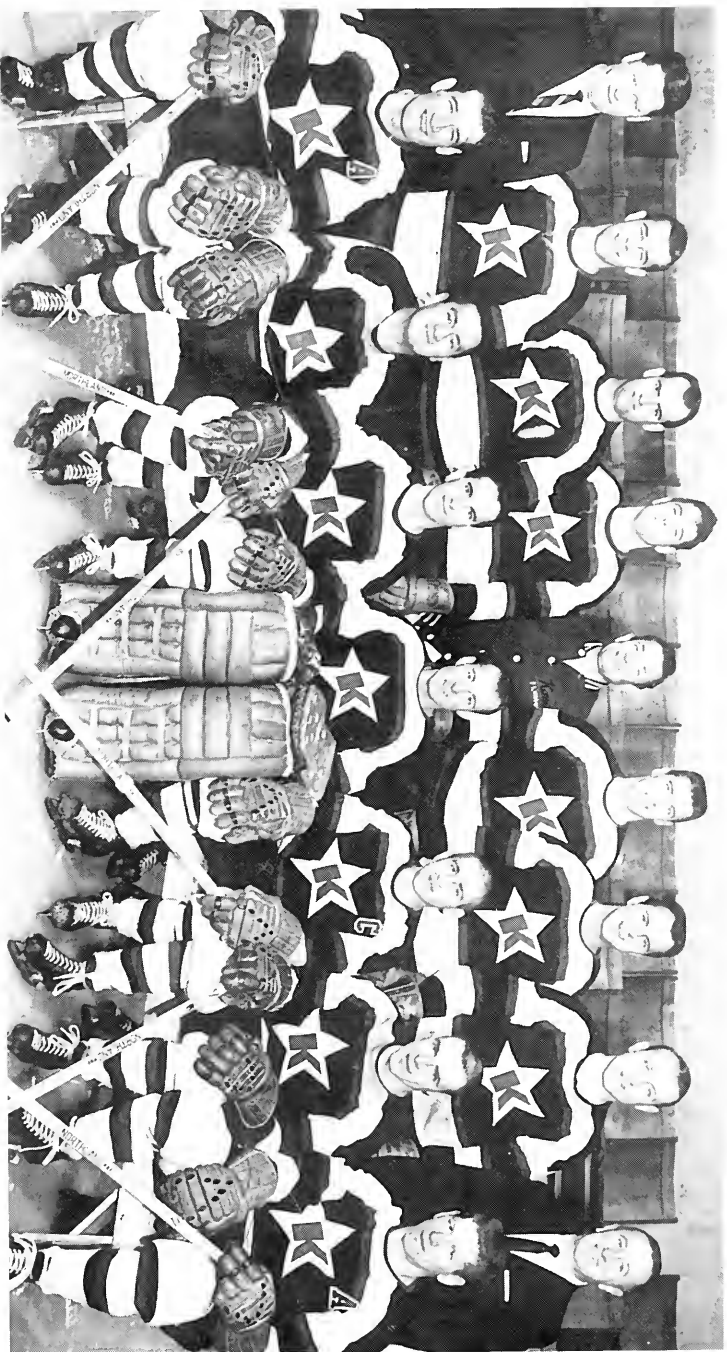
Lionel Repka (left) and Duane Rupp (right) put the squeeze on a Minneapolis player, 1959-60. Eddie Long is behind. Repka's position is similar to a hip check.



The 1959-60 team with Dave Thomas of The Hobby House (later of Wendy's) who is presenting them with a bucket of fried chicken. Left to right: Reno Zanier, Len Thomson, Eddie Long, Len Ronson, Art Stone, Bob McCusker (behind), Andy Voykin, Lloyd Maxfield, Lionel Repka, Thomas, Duane Rupp, Paul Strasser, John Ferguson, Art Hart, Con Madigan



Len Thomson



1962-63 Turner Cup team: front, Lionel Repka, Reg Primeau, Bob Rivard, Chuck Adamson, Eddie Long, John Goodwin, Len Thomson; back, Ken Ulliyot, Roger Maisonneuve, Nelson Bulloch, Gary Young, George Homenuk, Ted Wright, Norm Waslawski, Ivan Prediger, Colin Lister.



left, Chuck Adamson
right, The Jet Line: Merv Dubchak, Bobby Rivard, John Goodwin



1964-65 Turner Cup team: front, Norm Waslawski, Chick Balon, Bob Rivard, Chuck Adamson, Reg Primeau, Merv Dubchak, John Goodwin; back, Ernie Morrow, Eddie Long, Lionel Repka, Bill Orban, Cy Whiteside, Len Thomson, Ted Wright, Terry Pembroke, Cal Purinton, Ken Ulliyot, Colin Lister.



left, Ken Ullyot and Ron Ullyot
right, Colin Lister



top: On the bus, Group of bridge players in front, Ken Ulliyot, Roger Maisonneuve, Gary Young, Ivan Prediger (not playing), Colin Lister, Man with back to camera not identified. Playing poker in back. bottom: On-ice workout



left: Cal Purinton and Terry Pembroke right: Reg Primeau



top: Michel Rouleau, Norm Waslawski, Doug Reid.
bottom: To the memory of all those great fights.



1972-73 Turner Cup team: front, Robbie Irons, Jim Hryciuk, Bob Miller, Brian Walker, Terry Pembroke, Don Atchison; middle, Marc Boileau, Jeff Ablett, Cal Purinton, Deam Sheremeta, D'Arcy Keating, Ray Brownlee, Jim Pearson, Terry Thomson, Bob Chase; back, Terry Reinecke, Chick Balon, Ron Ulliyot, Bob Fitchner, Bob Kirk, Wayne Ego, Ken Ulliyot, Colin Lister.



Four coaches: top, Moe Bartoli and Marc Boileau
bottom, Ralph Keller and Gregg Pilling (with wife Janis and son
Dan).



1976-77 team: The players call this 'the goon shot' front, Brian Holderness, Bob Chase, Ralph Keller, Colin Lister, Ken Ullyot, Robbie Irons; middle Terry Reinecke, Rob Laird, Rob Tudor, Mike Will, Lowell Ostlund, Terry Ewasiuk, Bob McNeice, Bill Welker; back, Terry McDougall, Dave Faulkner, Ron Zanussi, D'Arcy Keating, Terry Pembroke, Dave Norris, Tony Horvath, Doug Horbul.



left: Dr. Marvin Priddy stitches Robbie Laird's cut finger during a game. The players preferred not to use freezing. right: Robbie Irons



left: Moose Lallo



right: Some Kometes making a school visit, 1987-88, from left Jim Burton, Craig Channell, Rob Laird, Derek Ray, Alain Raymond.



The Western Union line:
Terry McDougall, Al Dumba, Robbie Laird



left: Ron Leef as Mr. July in the 1986 Komets
calendar.

right: Terry McDougall





top: Steve Salvucci and Robin Bawa.
bottom: Carey Lucyk and Wally Schreiber



Dale Baldwin, John Hilworth, Doug Rigler, Ron Leef, 1986.



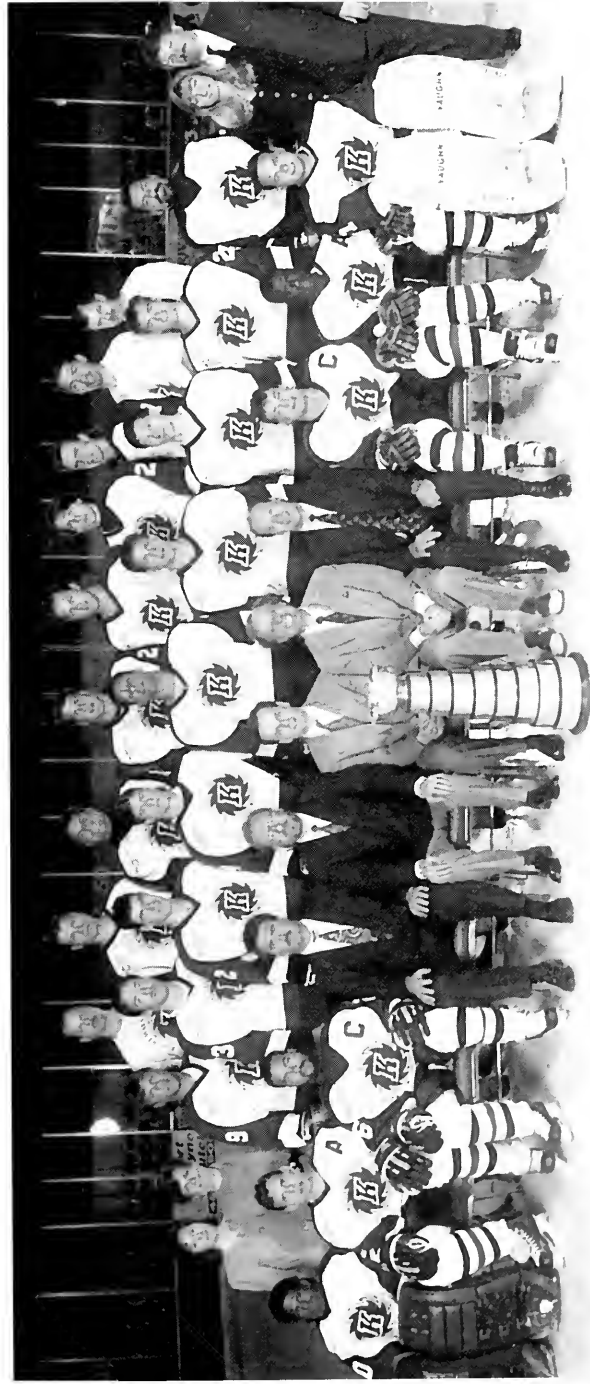
left: Komet Dale Baldwin keeps Milwaukee's Greg Tebutt from the puck.
19 February 1986. Tebutt was a Komet, 1981-82.
right: Barry Scully



top: Martin Burgers introduces Indy Ice player Ron Handy to the boards, April 1989. A brawl resulted. Handy was a Komets the following season.
 bottom: The MiG Line: Konstantin Shafronov, Slava Butsayev, Kathy Marbruger (fan club), Andrei Bashkirov.



Bruce Boudreau and Al Sims, 1991.



1992-93 Turner Cup team: front, Pokey Reddick, Carey Lucyk, Colin Chin, Derek Ray, David Franke, Michael Franke, Stephen Franke, Al Sims, Kevin MacDonald, Ian Boyce, Dave Gagnon; middle, Jody Grantham, Nancy Shirley, Bob Lakso, Sylvain Couturier, Guy Dupuis, Grant Richison, Steve Fletcher, Dave Smith, Igor Chibirev, Kelly Hurd, Scott Gruhl, Tammy Franke, Randi Marcom; back, Joe Franke, Ralph Barahona, Peter Hankinson, Bobby Jay, Jean-Marc Richard, Lee Davidson, Paul Willett, Kurt Skinner, Ed Sink Jr. Not pictured: Kory Kocur, Joel Savage, Steve Wilson, Bob Wilkie.



Keith Hitchens' amazing photo of the winning goal in the Atlanta Knights-Komets playoff game of 2 May 1993. Jean-Marc Richard (left) scored, his linemates, Colin Chin and Scott Gruhl, assisted and Dave Capuano's disbelieving expression says everything about how the Knights were feeling.



left: Pokey Reddick

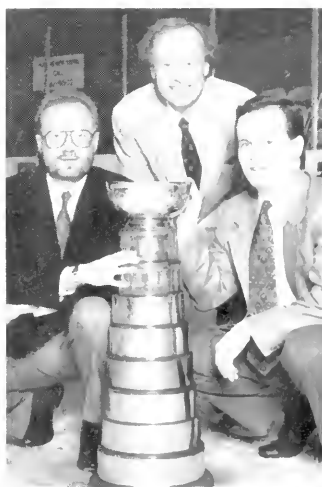


right: Jean-Marc Richard celebrating the 1993 Turner Cup.



left: Colin Chin
right: Steve Fletcher's hockey card





top: Ian Boyce and Scott Gruhl; bottom: Guy Dupuis and the Franke brothers with the Turner Cup (from left, David, Stephen, Michael)



2001-02 team: front: Doug Teskey, Kevin Bertram, Bill Franke, Michael Franke, Greg Puhalski, David Franke, Richard Franke, Brent Gretzky, Chad Grills, Martin Fillion, middle: Charity Richardson, Scott Sproat, Chuck Bailey, Troy Neumeier, Michel Massie, Jim Logan, Craig Desjardais, Derek Gauthier, David Mayes, Peter Cernak, Ryan Severson, Tommy Bolduc, Jody Grantham, Nancy Halaburda, Tammy Steinforth, Gene Evans, back: Rick Bireley, Jack Prindle, Joe Franke, Kevin Schmidt, Bobby Marshall, Christian Bragnola, Kelly Miller, Mike McKay, Dustin Virag, Ian Lampshire, Shawn Dundon, Randi Marcom.

remembers, "I knew Ted Garvin had sent him to fight. I backed off. I had my stick loose in my hand, in case. MacPhee stepped up, we started and he punched me six or seven times to my one. We went down in a heap, blood dripping. I thought it was me, but no, it was Ian. I went to the dressing room. I was sore but I looked like the hero. The weird thing was the ref left me alone. My mom was frantic and my dad was proud as punch. I got my clock cleaned but I looked like a hero."

On a night when CBS was showing a film about hockey violence, the K's played Kalamazoo at the Coliseum. The Fort Wayne fans were loud and as the game ended the Wings players made rude gestures at the stands. The fans littered the ice and blows were exchanged over the glass. Police with dogs had to be called in. The Wings' bus had to be hidden from the mob and then escorted by police to I-69. It might have been Toledo.

That summer the K's faced another financial crisis. Oral Smith and the Chamber of Commerce spearheaded a season ticket drive, and Ulliyot was forced to take out a huge loan.

Terry Pembroke

After Terry Pembroke's unusual, late start in hockey,⁶ he advanced quickly. At 12, he was playing midget with older players. "I was big and rough, they liked that," he says. His midget team were Ontario champions and they took him to play senior hockey at 14 with the Owen Sound Mercurys. He played with Bill McComb, formerly of the St. Louis Flyers (AHL), and Harry Kazarian. "He was the greatest hip checker," remembers Terry, "Five foot five and 200 pounds, a bowling ball. He could hit you and you went straight up. He taught me how to hit. I had all those old guys looking after me." Terry was taken up by Toronto, and he found 'you were in the Toronto organization for life.'

Playing junior, Terry suffered tendon injuries which threatened to end his hockey life, but an innovative doctor helped him make a comeback, although he had to switch to right defense as a result. His injury made it difficult to get Toronto's attention again and he was able to go to the New York Rangers training camp. He managed a big fight with Orland Kurtenbach and was named captain of a new Rangers farm team, the New York Rovers of the EHL. He says, "The EHL is where all the derelicts go, the drunks, the dopers." After some adventures there,

⁶ See p. 7.

they sent him to the Komets. "I was told I was going to Fort Worth. I arrived in December and wondered why there was all that snow in Texas." Ulliyot suggested he find a boarding house, but he moved into an apartment with Cal. "I was very impressed with the Komets. They were not in shape, but they could sure play." It was December of 1964, and Terry played his last game with the K's in the spring of 1978.

"He was quiet when he first came," says Jumbo, and Norm Waslawski agreed, "It took him a year to get used to the surroundings, but you could see the potential. He was a steady, tough defenseman, every game the same performance." Norm had put his finger on the quality which players from 1964, 1971 and 1978 all give Terry: steadiness. The other word they use is 'cool.' "He was a cool type of guy, steady, you never had to worry, he didn't look for trouble," said Moe Bartoli. "He was a jokester, a cool guy in the dressing room," opined Al Dumba.

He and Cal made a pair, the best of friends, which they remain. "Terry protected Cal," said team doctor Marvin Priddy. "I think he saved Cal's life. Cal wouldn't take care of himself, not try to prevent injury. He'd go into the boards, get in a fight. Terry is one of the softest touches on the team. He'd give you his last boot. He's as porous as a sieve."

In 1967-68, Terry was called to the Rangers' training camp, but he refused to go. Ulliyot told him he could not return to the Komets under those circumstances, so the Rangers sent him to Omaha. Cal went, too.

Gregg Pilling played with him in Omaha. "He was one of the young guys coming in, down to earth and his own person. I liked him, he was a leader. In those days before assistant coaches, it was important to me, his experience was invaluable. He was a good pro, what you expected a vet to be. He asked, 'What do you need from me?'"

The following season he spent partly in Omaha and partly in Buffalo, where he played little. "It was a lot of wasted time," he says, and he made an agreement with the Rangers to return to Fort Wayne but not go anywhere else. He was happy. "The greatest thing that happened in my minor pro career was coming here," he says, "I saw others playing their way through the leagues, and I didn't want it happening to me. I was settled." Cal had already returned, as well.

From here on, Terry was one of the veterans on the team, a strong defenseman who could move the puck, dependable, an anchor. "He had endurance," said Irons. "Playing through injuries." He says Terry was one of the best defensemen in the IHL.

He is remembered for his use of the hip check he had learned from Kazarian. "He was solid, with that hip checking—he broke my ankle," said Ron Ulyot, and Gary Gardner goes even further, "A Terry Pembroke hip check, that would do it as good as a fight. I haven't seen a good hip check since he left, guys left in a pile on the ice." It's surprising that he was not famous as a fighter, too. Although he could certainly fight, he wasn't inclined that way, but as Ron says, "He was with Cal."

A fight with Gary Gresdal of the Des Moines Oak Leafs early in his career is memorable for some because it left Terry with a shut eye. "He wouldn't even come to practice, he didn't want it to be seen," said a teammate. Dan Bonar says, "He couldn't stand blood, it made him want to hurt somebody."

By the 70s, he and Irons were the team leaders, 'the old guys.' "He was a good captain, a natural leader and everyone liked him," said Ron. "You'd want him there in key situations," commented Laird. "He'd been there a long time, people listened and he had a great influence on the younger guys," said Rusty Patenaude, and Dumba agreed.

"Terry hated to lose," said Cal, "But good players hate losing, they give a hundred percent."

When he retired, Terry dumped his skates in the river, his way of giving up the game. He hasn't worn a pair since. During the off-season he was part owner of Club Angel. He now travels, training horses, looking every inch the cowboy.

"Terry was the older guy who sat next to me all year," said Dan Bonar, "He talked about Cal and laughed. The day I was leaving to go to the AHL, he said to me, 'Twenty years ago, they sent me down for two weeks. Could you tell them I'm ready now?'"

Players Come and Go: The Seventies

Everyone agrees Wayne Ego was great at passing. "Wayne was easy to play with," said Ray Brownlee, "I would have to outsmart them, make a break and pass kind of play, and Wayne would get you the puck." Irons said that Wayne played with Balon and Ablett, "good wingers that he made great. Wayne would give it to Chick and zip, he was gone." "He made beautiful plays," said Dean Sheremeta, pointing out that Wayne had lots of assists (more than 60 in both 1972-73 and 1973-74).

He was quiet, but still contributed, acting as catalyst for the power play according to Fitchner. Pembroke said he had an inner drive and did not want to be beaten, to the point of sacrificing himself. He later

coached John Baldassari on the Toronto Marlboros, where he was still noticeably quiet.

Brian Walker is one of the unsung heroes of the Komets, according to Terry Reincke. "He wasn't naturally talented but he worked hard and made something," he said. He was smart, smooth and had a great attitude, but his career was cut short by a broken leg suffered in a car accident. He lived with Laird and McDougall in Fort Wayne, 'crazy fun times' according to Laird, who would not elaborate. Walker later played for Kramfors in Sweden, which Brian says once lost a playoff game 27-3. "We were outshot 115-15 and I had 12 of those shots."

Mike Penasse was the badboy of the Macon Whoopees before going to the Philadelphia Firebirds. Pilling brought him here. He was known for his versatility. "He played every position," said Irons, "And did it as it should be done." Pilling commented, "The only place he didn't play was goal, but I'm not sure he couldn't have." During a Firebirds playoff, Pilling sent out Penasse when they were two men short. "He dekes and dives—he was methodical—and he scored."

Mike got his first skates at 12 and started skating on the lakes and creeks near Sturgeon Falls, Ontario, where he grew up. He played his junior hockey in New Brunswick. He says his early career was 'as a bench warmer and goon' until he met up with Pilling. A skilled team player, he was always there when needed, as if he liked the pressure. "He was quiet," said Dan Bonar, "But he didn't play quiet."

Penasse is a Native Canadian. He was known as Kono. Pilling tells why: "He got that nickname while playing for me in Philadelphia of the NAHL. We were playing against Brian Conacher's team in Utica NY, and Mike was having a bad night. It seemed like every time we got a lead, he'd cough up the puck, and it'd be tied again. Finally in the 3rd period, when we went ahead 4-3, I think, this leather-lung Utica fan yells down to our bench 'Hey Pilling, it's time for you to send out that big dumb Hawaiian for us again!' We were laughing so hard on the bench about the Hawaiian thing, so I said 'Kono, get the hell out there and do something different.' He scored, we won and he's been Kono ever since."

Ray Tessier was a popular player on the Saginaw Gears in 1972-73 but he was called 'least improved' and traded to Fort Wayne early in 1973-74. He was mostly used for his muscle. Gallmeier commented he 'could solve some of the Komet apparent weaknesses on defense.'

"I inherited Bob McNeice and I didn't think much of him at first," says Pilling, "He didn't stand out, but Ulliot said he was good

both up front and on defense. I found he could play, he was very valuable at killing penalties." Norris' assessment was, "He used his smarts to his advantage, he could read the play well and made things happen."

Terry Ewasiuk was big and mild-mannered. "He could be intimidating, but it wasn't in his personality," said Laird. "It's all in the expectations for a big guy. Hockey is a physical game, let's face it." His teammates called him The Bear. Pilling told him to use his size, so he did and racked up sixty PIM in the playoffs alone in 1977-78. He loved the crowds and says he played to them while he was here. On the bus, he liked cards and a cold one, playing hearts with Pilling, Keating and Irons.

Jimmy Pearson was one of the Amarillo Wranglers who came to Fort Wayne. He stayed two seasons before going on to Hershey. "What an incredible talent, he was a perfect match for me," said Pembroke. "All I had to do was get the puck to him." His shot from the point is still remembered. Tom McVie says, "Those young players in that league at that time! Jimmy was coming out of the end. I went to an open spot and he read the play perfectly. He could do this, read the game from a defensive position. He made the pass and I scored."

Bernie MacNeil, a tough guy, was 'not motivated,' according to Terry Pembroke. "But you could talk him into things. We were in warmups against Port Huron. Cal and I got McNeil hot because we told him there was a guy on the other team calling him a wuss. He actually started the first fight."

Dean Sheremeta came third in the scoring in 1972-73, but scored the most goals on the team. He was very young. Marc kept him on the ice after practice and leaned on him about getting into shape. Marc did not allow him to play in the exhibition games, but had him watch instead. "They were so rough, brutal, I didn't know if I wanted to play," he says. "So Marc told me they would settle down afterward. They were just fighting for their jobs." He had a good start, something of a slump in mid-season and then came back in the spring, scoring a hat trick in the last period of the last game of the season. Off the ice, he kept everyone in stitches. He learned a lot from Marc Boileau: "They wanted me to shoot, and I always wanted to go in and make a big deke. When I played with Brian Walker earlier in the season, he'd get the puck back to me. I'd come from behind and be flying down the wing. Marc said to do this, start late and then the defense will be going back and you'll be flying and you'll beat them. He kept at me about it, and so did Ken Ullyot, he'd have me up in his office."

Dean was from a small town from as far north as the railway went in Ontario. "Bob Chase started calling me Big Dino. My father could listen to the games up in Kapuskasing, but only by going out on a country road outside of town. He'd put my brothers in the back seat and drive out there. Bob Chase would say, 'There comes Big Dino!' and they'd get excited. Once he said, 'There comes Big Dino, and he shoots—it hits the crossbar and it's gone all the way back to Kapuskasing!' My dad made a big deal out of that."

In the 1975 training camp, Greg Clouse arrived from Ontario and François Robert from Quebec. Both were high draft choices for Minnesota. They made the team, but Robert quit after eleven games and returned home, ending his career. Clouse did the same after 23 games.

Jim Hrycuik had 23 points in 25 games in 1972-73. He'd been the twentieth guy on a 19 guy roster in Hershey and came to Fort Wayne to get playing time.

Lorne Molleken tried out for the K's in 1977-78, playing a single exhibition game, but didn't make the team. He went to the Saginaw Gears that year, although he spent most of his time as a tough foe of the Komets in Toledo and Indianapolis. Terry Pembroke said, "He had a cocky attitude. 'I won't be beat. If you do, you'll be wearing a stick around your neck.' He was very talented."

Terry Thomson spent his entire pro career, aside from a handful of games, in six seasons with the Komets. Described as steady and sturdy, he was there all the time. "There were only four defensemen," said Reincke, "So they played thirty minutes." In 1972-73, the four defensemen were Cal, Terry Pembroke, Terry Thomson and Bob Kirk, who was only 5 foot 7 and 160 pounds, but feisty. Rob Laird said of Thomson, "Those are the guys you appreciate being there."

Rob Tudor says of himself, "My skating wasn't the greatest, not strong enough. I worked my butt off to get where I got. I knew how to survive, not flashy, but I had to hit or get a hit to get into the game. I had to be physical. That's why I had only a decade, my body got ruined. I see other guys as good as me playing to forty. The defensive game is easier when you get older." After his rookie season here, he had an interesting career in the NHL, CHL and AHL, including a season in Germany.

In 1985 Rob was playing senior hockey in Regina with Dumba, and they did well. Rick Laird saw them play and told his brother Rob. Laird invited Tudor to return to Fort Wayne as a utility player for a few games, which he did.

Tony Horvath played here in 1976-77 and returned for a few games in 1981-82 after seasons in Muskegon and Toledo. In 46 games, he had 205 PIM in his rookie year. "It was frustrating to be his partner," says Ewasiuk, "He was a raw kid, full of energy, bouncing around." He later played for Pilling in Toledo, where the crowd loved him.

Kevin McCloskey played three seasons here, 1977-80. He was tall and lanky, and not physical, but as Kono said, "Eventually he could move the puck. What a good kid!" He'd been chosen in round 4 of the NHL draft by Minnesota. "We were lucky to have him," said Bonar. "He was all over the ice." Despite not being tough, as a defenseman he was always there, diving for the puck, according to Dumba.

Terry Bucyk was NHL star Johnny Bucyk's nephew, a round 2 draft choice by the LA Kings. After a time in Fort Worth, he spent a season here, 1975-76. Aside from a few games, it was his only pro experience. "If you watched him in practice, he was NHL material," said Sid Veysey, "But not in the games. Lots of players are better in practice. It has to do with the desire to play."

Ray Brownlee was a third round draft choice for Boston and an adept puck handler. He spent his rookie season with the Oklahoma City Blazers (CHL) and followed his Fort Wayne year by going up to Denver (WHL). A broken wrist cut his season there short.

There was so much player traffic in February 1980, the dressing room must have had a swinging door. The K's sold Mark Murphy after 8 games and added Dave Wilkens from Dayton for a five-game tryout. In mid-February, with the five games past, there was speculation that Wilkens will stay and Richard Pepin (Moose calls him Peppie) will go. Although Dave made it to ten games, he went and Peppie stayed. Rick was here for two full seasons, 1978-80.

Doug Johnston played only a handful of games with the K's, but stayed in Fort Wayne to become part of the hockey community here. He had played in Calgary, Edmonton and Lethbridge of the WCHL. Gregg Pilling was also from Lethbridge and that connection led to an invitation for Doug to come to Fort Wayne. "When I arrived, I thought it was Bugtussel. There was more snow than in Canada! My first game there were three fights in five minutes. I got kicked out of the game after ten minutes. Gregg came in and asked what I thought. I said I doubted I'd stay, but he said give it a chance. I liked the Coliseum and the mall, so I stayed." When he signed with the K's, he was told, "We don't pay as much because Fort Wayne is such a wonderful place."

Johnston had an interesting background, having gone at Fr. David Bauer's request to Japan to play in an industrial league there. "He was a big man, a pickup at the end of the year," said Norris, "He called a spade a spade. Forecheck, backcheck, paycheck, that's how he felt."

"I was a defensive defenseman," says Johnston, "I knew my role. I didn't have a lot of pride, but I knew if I broke my nose again it would ruin my modeling career. It had been broken so many times, I'd straighten it out on the bench. It was always bleeding, but I'd swallow it rather than let the guy know he'd got me. Once they knew you'd fight, they'd leave you alone."

He loved to play. "Hockey is a great foundation for life, even if you've only played juvenile, the concept is teamwork. You learn it. You can't buy this. You end up liking the competition, hating the day off. The only thing hockey players are naïve about is the politics of the workplace. Players talk plainly to one another, but don't bear a grudge. They have an eye on the ultimate goal, and this helps build teamwork." He describes working with Pilling as 'laughing all the way up the hill.'

Dave Norris

The entrepreneurial skills and street smarts for which Dave Norris is known started early, since he was on his own at the age of fifteen. An early summer job was at the Haliburton Hockey Haven, owned by Wren Blair, which led him to a place on the Markham Waxers, a suburban Toronto team with ties to the Toronto Marlboros.

He was cut from the Waxers in January, but he continued to practice with them. His devotion surprised the coach, who re-signed him. A spot on the Waxers meant an automatic place at the Marlies' training camp, and his success there has been described earlier.

He became an enforcer because he saw it as a role he could play, but he also liked it. "I hated bullies. When I was young I saw them—when I was ten, I saw a baseball coach beaten up by two other coaches. Also, there's lots of psychology in fighting, you have to analyze the foe."

His career with the Komets is interesting, because he was teamed with some top young players, including three IHL rookies of the year in a row, Sid Veysey, Ron Zanussi and Dan Bonar. His other linemates in those years were Dan O'Driscoll, Rob Tudor and Al Dumba. The fans saw some hot hockey from those lines, and Norris was the tough guy who gave the others a chance to score. He did a little scoring himself.

too. Bonar remembers his protection, "A lot of guys didn't want any part of him, and that left more room for Al and me."

He was not a big guy, but he was strong and fought easily. "He could handle those Toledo boys," said Irons approvingly. Gary Gardner remembers a pregame fight at center ice between Norris and Garry MacMillan of Dayton—in fact, he remembers Norris at center ice with several guys. "He would always square off with his hands," he says.

Terry Reincke says, "Dave had to work hard to be in the IHL. He did it through dedication. As a tough guy, he was on call and right there all the time." Bonar calls him 'a grinder to fit the Pilling mold.'

A brawl in Muskegon in 1977-78 resulted in a legal mess: the team urged Dave to plead guilty, they'd back him. It dragged on for three years, and then they didn't. "The Komets let him down," said Bob Chase.

His memory remains green with those who saw him fight and score, however, and top scorer Dan Bonar says, "I was very glad of our line. Dave was responsible for my success."

Dave now runs a sports clothing company in Toronto, and Chase says, "Everyone in hockey in Canada knows Davy Norris."

The Fans

For the players, one advantage to playing in Fort Wayne was the fans. It's a universal feeling for players from 1952 to 2002. Knowledgeable and enthusiastic, the fans made the Komets feel special. "When I saw the Fort Wayne fans' enthusiasm for hockey," said Rory Cava, "I didn't realize there were places in the US like that. In Dallas nobody cared. It was almost like a Canadian city where they understand hockey."

"You can feel a lot of emotion in hockey," says Kelly Hurd. "There's an energy with the crowd on your side. You're up or down and they are too." "Other places are not as warm to the players as here," said Gus Braumberger, and Cal affirmed, "You're only as good as the fans, and even in our worst years, the fans were great." "The fans were dedicated," said Doug Rigler, "Even when there were few people at the games, there was a core of faithful."

"I was surprised to find so many former players here and so close," said Jim Logan; asked why this had happened, he said, "There's so much tradition, the support in the city, a great management. How you are treated, it brings the team together." Other players had found the atmosphere surprising too. "The Komets were the biggest thing in Fort

Wayne,” said Dave Richardson, “People take you home for dinner, they bring you cigars, they recognized us at the movies and let us in free. We were treated like NHLers and it sure was enjoyable for us.” “It was like being a king in town,” said Brian Walker, and Jumbo Goodwin summed up, “It was a treat to step on the ice here.”

Many players speak of how the fans opened their homes to them, for meals or even to live. Bob McNeil started off living at the Y, but was invited by Eugene Patrick to move to his house. “It was a great arrangement,” says Bob, “Like being at home.” Single players lived with married players, current or past, as when Paul Shmyr stayed with Hartley McLeod, and many stayed with the Mother of the Komets, Ruth Wiegmann.

Colin Chin says, “It’s a blue collar town, so fans here prefer a rugged team, not a finesse team. It’s the same fans who go to the WWF. They’d ask me if the fights were fake, and I’d say, ‘If they were, you’d see me fighting a lot more.’”

The management has always had special nights to bring in fans. A 1976-77 program listed Azar’s Halloween Party Night, MS night, Photo Night, Turkey Shoot night, Lutheran night, Y-Indian Guides night (YMCA) and Boy Scout & Girl Scout night. One Boy Scout night brought the biggest crowd to attend a K’s game. After the thousand season ticket holders were seated, the doors were opened to the scouts. The crowds were standing and sitting everywhere.

The photo nights were very popular. “We had them regularly in Colin Lister’s time,” says Rigler, “Not every player had one. Some of them didn’t want it. The more public players did. People could have their picture taken with a player, in front of the net or sitting on a bench. Stellhorn’s took care of it.” In 1983-84 there were two versions of the photo night. For Ron Leef Night, every program included a picture of Ron, which he would autograph. For Robbie Laird Photo Night, you could have your picture taken with Robbie for \$3 before the game, the finished articles to be picked up between the second and third periods.

From the 50s, there was a Komets booster club, although the form and meetings have varied over the years. In 1952-53, there were monthly meetings, even in the off season, to discuss the games. By 1954, there were 500 members, a monthly bulletin and chartered buses to away games. Many players attended in the early days, and some liked it. In the 60s, Ullyot expected the players to be there, and Was and Len confirm that a majority would go. Pat Conn was president of the booster club for

a long time and interested herself in the players' welfare, including helping them find places to live.

Busloads of fans made a difference out of town. "I was blown away by the support and knowledge of fans when we went to Port Huron," said Brian Walker, and Eddie Long remembers a time when five busloads went to Cincinnati. The after-game parties were also welcome, most of the time. Cal tells of a time when three busloads of fans accompanied the team to Des Moines in 1969-70. He and Terry Pembroke rented a car and left for Omaha immediately after the game, returning only just in time to catch the team bus back to Fort Wayne. Cal explained, "That way, we could tell our wives we weren't there in Des Moines for the party. Of course, we partied in Omaha instead."

Celia Kiefer, who was raising three children as a single parent in the 70s, found that Saturday night at the game was both 'a good place to vent my frustrations,' and an affordable place for the family to have a good time together. "We spent a lot of Saturdays there in section 34," she says, "And lots of the same people were there with us each week."

Seeing the same people around you meant that you came to know them. "We were in lower section 25," said Bohn Popp, "I learned a lot from the other fans. They were very knowledgeable. They had a lot of fun and created a great environment."

Businessmen fans gave them lots of free things too. Gunnar Elliott, of course, gave the players cases of beer and Cuban cigars. "He'd just call me to come over to AALCO for it," said George Polinuk. His generosity was outstanding. Hartley McLeod likes to remember a time when he was working for Gunnar, who had been trying a new brand of beer. It didn't sell. He asked Hartley if he'd like to take some home and Hartley accepted. Gunnar gave him fifty cases!

"I had all this beer in my basement," says McLeod, "So I'd invite some of the Komets over to help me drink it. It wasn't very good beer, but we drank it anyway, because it was free."

One fan remembered by the players is Gertrude Webster. Mrs. Webster is blind, but she listened to the games on WOWO while sitting right there by the rail at the blue line. She could recognize players by the way they skated.

Of course, the fans are not friendly all the time. "We've been around long enough," said Jim Logan. "Especially on the road, I can block it out, but hometown fans it's worse. It bothers me a little bit. You've got to stay focused, so sometimes it's just a muffled noise."

Brent Gretzky was a special target because of his brother, Wayne. "Sometimes they're funny and you tell your teammates," he says, "But if they keep saying it, it gets tired." Norm Waslawski remembered, "You'd get booed and heckled and then you'd score a goal and they'd cheer." One special heckler for Norm was Lester Jones. "He was always heckling. Then I'd score and look at him and his wife would smack him. Les got on my case from the first time I played here. He picked me out, I don't know why. After we got to know one another, he'd have parties for the guys." As for the fans heckling out of town players, Ray Brownlee says, "Fans have stronger feelings about it than we do."

We associate throwing things largely with fans in other cities. "Once Jumbo came out in front of the net," says Adamson, "And suddenly he was out cold. A bolt hit him right in back of the head."

Longtime fans are not unusual in Fort Wayne. One of the best known longtime fans is Gary Gardner, one of two loud fans known as 'Leatherlungs.' Gary originally lived in Toledo and he says, "Nobody yelled here, but everybody did in Toledo." When he moved to Fort Wayne in the late 60s, he switched his hockey allegiance too. "It was always clean and had some humor," he says. "It got to the point where it was expected. I never planned what to do. Then we'd start to pick on someone. You know, we'd pick on Ivan [Prediger]. We yelled at Bill Riley and he flipped a puck up our way."

Gary says his voice wasn't really loud, but piercing. The sound in the Coliseum is such that anyone could be heard from end to end if it's empty. "When the crowds were small, it was easy to be heard," he says, "With 8000, it's harder."

The powers that be did not like it. The IHL commissioner once did some yelling himself—at Gary—and Colin Lister took him aside and told him to stop. It made no difference, and Jack Loos, the organist, was instructed to play in any quiet moment. "It became a game," says Gary. "Jack would look at me and I'd look at him. He'd give me a moment to fit it in, but carefully so Colin wouldn't know. Jack enjoyed it too."

It was Bob Chase who gave him the nickname, and the players also enjoyed the game. "You'd see them laughing," says Gary, "And the fans loved it, no one ever said stop in the stands. Even now they still remember, I got stopped in the street. I never got a free ticket or a free coke out of it, although Ablett and some guys once sent over a pitcher of beer at the Lighthouse."

Gary represents a kind of fan—loyal, coming for a long time, with great experience and knowledge of the game. “You always recognize a great goal, a great play,” he says. He speaks of the things the fans love to see: a good check, a good rivalry, a player who will draw their attention. Who fell in that category here? “Laird, who gave everything. Zan and Tudor. Mike Jakubo had the whole realm, an all round game, standing up for his teammates. Give me a guy who can give a nice check in the corner, cough up the puck. If there’s a goal, he might not even get the credit.” He liked the rivalry between Fort Wayne and Indy, cities close together so ‘it was almost automatic.’ On the other hand, he hates excuses when the team loses. “They tell you they were tired. Why didn’t they call us, tell us they were tired and not to come?”

Some fans, especially young ones, would choose a single player to idolize. “Some fans put you on a pedestal,” said Cal. “I hated it. Some liked it.” Everybody likes to have a favorite player, to watch his progress, cheer his goals extra loud and boo his penalties too.

There were thousands of adolescent girl crushes over fifty years, and probably almost every player was at the receiving end at some time. Here is one story, told by Cristie Lutz about her feelings for Dave Norris:

“I was, of course, his biggest fan. Every game, I’d go to the ice and watch him warm up. #15 was my hero! I’d have to get in the attic to count all the pucks he gave me. I have pictures of him too. I’d get his autograph. He said to me one time, ‘You already have my autograph,’ in a teasing kind of way. I said, ‘Not on this picture!’ He always took time to make me feel like I was his biggest fan. He knew me by name. One night he told me to meet him outside the locker room after the game. He came out and gave me the stick. He had signed it, ‘To Cris. Hope you have a Merry Christmas. Love, Dave Norris.’ Then to top it off, he gave me a kiss. Don’t get the wrong idea. I was a young teen and my hero just gave me a kiss. I was in heaven. How many kids today get to meet their favorite sports hero, receive a gift and a kiss?

“Dave was a great hockey player, a fighter as well. I laugh when I show my kids how Dave dropped the gloves, rolled up the sleeves, and put his fists up. All that aside, he was a very nice person. Any time I was there, he made a point to say hi. When there was a ‘skate with the Komets night,’ he would take a few minutes to talk with me.

“I know that I was just a kid and had a huge crush on Dave. But looking back, I am thankful that he, a Fort Wayne Komet hockey player, took the time to care about me, a fan. That’s the Dave Norris that I

remember. Maybe he would not remember my name, but I'm sure he'd remember how much this kid used to love to watch him play."

There were autograph seekers at most games. Doug Rigler observes, "Some didn't like signing. I thought, it takes only a short time, so why not? Whether it was a good or bad game, it didn't matter. They were usually kids about 7-14, a mix of boys and girls." Fan Dennis Blume says, "With no glass the fans could hang over the boards. During games, kids would call over the players for autographs. I have an IHL yearbook with all the opposing players' autographs for the year in it."

Dean Sheremeta, at 20 a top scorer for the team in 1972-73, says, "I come from a little town. I came to a city like that and the fans adored me. I'd be signing autographs after a game, and the other guys would say, 'Come on, never mind that.' And I'd tell them, no, the fans are part of our team too!"

Terry McDougall

The names of linemates Terry McDougall and Robbie Laird will always be linked. The two intense, hard-playing forwards showed what playing together can mean. "That marriage with Laird," said Pembroke, "They were the perfect couple. Robbie protected Terry."

Dave Norris remarked, "On the Swift Current Broncos, Terry McDougall was the star," which is born out by his stats, more than a hundred points each season. He was drafted by the Vancouver Canucks in 1973 and sent to Des Moines, where he spent two seasons, but his career did not take off. Once he came to Fort Wayne in 1975, he was paired with Laird and everything happened.

"For four seasons I played with the playmaker," said Laird, "The best player who ever put on a Komets uniform, and he doesn't get the recognition. We complimented one another not just on ice but off. He had great on ice vision, which makes a great playmaker. Also, good hockey sense and he was a real competitor first."

"He was as good a playmaker as Thomson," agreed Irons, "And he made his wingers better players, Laird, Dumba. I think he's as good a hockey player pound for pound as anyone would want." Irons was one of several players who chose Terry as the best Komets player of the 1970s. Chase ranked him with Thomson and Rivard as the best in fifty years, and Len himself said, "He's crazy, but one of the best that ever was."

The aura of craziness grows from the intensity of his playing. "He was always wrapped a little tight," said Pilling, "Which is a risk. It

leads to taking a bad penalty, one at the wrong time, that hurts the team. And a little too vocal.” “He was overcompetitive,” said Irons. “He wanted to win and was upset with players who did things wrong. Once you got to know him, you understood.”

“Terry was here because there were not so many rules,” said Pembroke. “He was a free spirit. That might be the management’s nightmare, but he was a player’s player.” “The most talented player in the IHL,” affirmed Norris. “But he was never discovered elsewhere and he was frustrated. Maybe he skated too much to the tune of his own drum and didn’t flow with the status quo. What a talent!”

“In the days of Ralph Keller’s coaching,” said Terry Reincke. “There weren’t too many stars and he was it. He had puck handling skills and could score, and he lived hard, pushing the envelope.”

“When the rookies arrived,” said Rob Tudor. “It took him about three months to give them any appreciation. Once he knew us, it was better. He was the leader, a finesse player.” “He was talented, but his expectations of others were high. He could be a tough guy to play with and he didn’t like mistakes,” said Doug Johnston. If he saw a mistake, he said so. Laird said, “He told you if you weren’t in the right place,” and Pembroke laughed. “He was always mouthy on the ice. He invented taunting.”

The fiery playmaker was never below 85 points in his six full seasons with the K’s, and in the great year with Laird and Dumba (1978-79), he had 139, 82 of them for assists. The Western Union line accumulated 357 points that season. McDougall’s links with his linemates were the reason: “He was one of the smartest players when it came to passing,” said Dumba. “He could see the ice, his vision was his best feature. He always knew what I was going to do.”

He was traded to Flint in midseason 1981-82. “They got rid of him to move some older guys,” said Kotsopoulos. Terry was 28. He retired partway through 1983-84.

“He was tough,” said Pembroke. “It’s easy to be tough when you are tough, and he was the epitome of toughness.” Mike Penasse summed up, “He may have been small in stature but he was big in heart.”

Gregg Pilling

1977-78 can be summed up for many players using Robbie Irons’ words: “It was one of the most enjoyable seasons we had, and successful personally and team-wise, but with a disappointment at the

end.” After winning the Huber Trophy, the K’s were defeated 4 games to 1 in the playoff semifinals by their old rival, Toledo.

It was still six months none of them would forget. The new coach, Gregg Pilling, had recently been coaching the Philadelphia Firebirds. He saw IHL coaches moving up to the NHL and decided he might try that route too. He encountered Ken Ullyot at an NHL meeting and agreed to come to Fort Wayne.

Pilling’s personal and coaching style was a departure from tradition. “In his opening speech to the team,” Pembroke remembered, “He said, ‘Look, this is not the NHL, it is the IHL. We’re not here for the money. We’ve got to have fun. We provide a product and have fun doing it.’ The team policed itself because he understood.”

The result was a winning team. Their respect for Pilling continues today. Pembroke says, “He’s an incredible human.” For Laird, “He’s a special man. He made the game fun at the rink and on the road. We would have gone through the wall for Gregg.”

Here are some players’ opinions of Gregg:

Al Dumba: It was the most fun I ever had playing hockey. But not only fun, there was respect, too, a gleam in his eye that said, ‘Don’t cross me.’ He kept us off balance and I liked it. He also respected us.

Doug Johnston: He could get more out of average players. You weren’t afraid of making mistakes with him, you’d just live with it and that gives you greater confidence.

Mike Penasse: I finally got a coach that knew my talent. He gave me the freedom that I needed to play to my potential. I had a rude awakening when I went to pro—it was frustrating. I could do it all, stick handle through the whole team and score. Maybe he saw that and the others didn’t. He stuck up for his players, they wanted to play for him.

Terry Ewasiuk: His mind is always going. He was always looking to get an edge. He put bright bulbs in the opponents’ dressing room so everything would look dull. Players played for Gregg in a way they didn’t for Ralph. Even less skilled guys could win if they were a team, and he gave everyone a little to do. They’d try to exceed their bit.

Robbie Laird: His methods were unorthodox, he made us all play different positions. Nothing surprised you with him. What he wanted to do was to stimulate us and to make the other team angry. He got close to players, and we became a close knit and very tight group.”

Dan Bonar: I had never had a coach who was such a character before. Here I was, my first pro year and it was so innovative. Lots of his ideas worked, some were crazy.

Undoubtedly his greatest innovation was his use of the playbook. "We'd never seen a strategy or plays," said Norris, "Now we'd go to play #18, it gave us something to think about. For each game, there was one bible. He was the first coach who wasn't negative. Hockey is a negative sport, a game of trying to keep your job and trying to find someone to blame—ref, owner, manager, coach." Irons also put his finger on this point: "Gregg was young and untraditional, more casual, even in practices, but he had a system. His biggest strength was he had a playbook that had belonged to Fred Shero."

Pilling had worked with Shero in Philadelphia and used the playbook there, realizing its value. He gave each Komet a copy and told them to keep it in their bag in case they needed it. "It was very simple," he says, and Ewasiuk echoes, "Common sense."

Pilling kept track of every practice, what he did and how it worked. "Every practice was the same, different ways of doing drills, so the players were never sure what was coming next. It was always something everyone could accomplish. They could hardly wait to get back on the ice." Fred's playbook was perhaps the most valuable thing the players took away from that year. Ewasiuk, Penasse, Bonar, Johnston have based their own coaching on Gregg and his playbook.

Pilling's philosophy can be summed up in one phrase: keep them thinking. Some Pilling drills were: two stick day (playing with two sticks taped together); no laces day (very loose skates); mixing lines in practice; line rushes with two or three pucks; shooting the puck from one dot to another; playing golf on the ice.

If a line didn't practice together, it didn't matter, said Ewasiuk. "We knew game time, we'd be back together." For Pilling, it was insurance. People need to be flexible, prepared to play with anyone. "You were working hard," said Terry, "But didn't notice because you were enjoying it and you knew it wasn't long."

As the season started, Pilling made few changes. He brought Penasse with him and traded for Dumba from Dayton. Dave Faulkner went to Port Huron for Mike Boland. There were some difficulties initially, but "that's necessary with a new coach," Gregg said, "All the crap happened early and we went from third or fourth place to first."

"In a new team you feel your way the first month," said Penasse. "Pembroke, Irons, the older guys, handled themselves well, took it on themselves to make the younger guys comfortable."

The two goalies that year were the veteran Irons and a Chicago Blackhawks prospect, Murray Bannerman. He was only twenty years old, known as Muzz.

Bannerman had a good year, 44 games and a goals against average of 3.28. "He was good," said Pilling, "But he had a weak last quarter for us. He seemed to weaken below his capabilities while Robbie got stronger and stronger. Muzz had his gloves stolen and he never seemed the same, even after we got them back."

Pembroke remembered, "I changed my style for Muzz. I would block shots for some goalies, but I'd be blocking his vision. If Robbie saw me down, he thought I'd got the puck. Muzz and I talked angles so we'd be on the same wavelength." Laird described Muzz as calm and unemotional. Norris observed, "He knew he was going to Chicago. He and Robbie complemented each other. We all knew Muzz was a star." He was indeed an all-star goalie for Chicago in the 80s.

The year started poorly, then during a home game against the Grand Rapids Owls, there was at bench emptying brawl at the end. "Rick Dorman of Grand Rapids started it," says Pilling, "But Ken was mad, said we don't do that here." It helped get the guys going.

McDougall and Laird, with a cast on his hand, were on one line and O'Driscoll, McNiece and Ewasiuk on another. The third had Norris, Dumba and rookie Dan Bonar. Dumba said, "I was not a natural scorer, but I never got outworked. I was lucky to have Dan and Dave. We helped one another. Dave got 30 goals that year too. Dave would go hard to the net and create some room." Bonar was second and Dumba seventh in the league scoring race. Of his performance this year, Gallmeier wrote that Norris was 'more than just the other winger.'

Port Huron was first in their division and the K's were tired one night, so Pilling tried having four sets of 2 forwards and three sets of 3 defensemen, having two up front and three back. "In the first period," said Bonar, "Gregg said to ice it every chance we had. Port Huron got wired and we beat them 2-1."

As well as these highly technical plans, Gregg liked to try other things to keep the foe off-balance. Len Ircandia, the Kalamazoo defenseman, had had 446 PIM the previous season. He also had a large nose and moustache. During the first game of the season with Kalamazoo, Ircandia

got a penalty. The penalty box was beside the Komet bench. Pilling left the bench and disappeared. He soon reappeared wearing a Groucho Marx mask with a big nose and moustache. Len was so angry he was thrown out of the game. Throughout, Gregg hadn't said a word.

Pilling commented on the top Milwaukee goon to a local paper, "I don't want to say he's dumb, but I heard he uses a checklist for getting dressed." He tried things on his own players, too; on a road trip to Flint, he pulled the bus over an hour out of town, stopped at a Dairy Queen and everyone ate. Conventional thinking forbade sweets the day of a game. And for Robbie Irons, "I was nervous and hated this sort of thing."

His most famous exploit of the year was the 'revolving goalies' game. A road trip involved Saginaw, Muskegon and Grand Rapids. The game in Saginaw was for first place in the league. Pilling told the players to win two, and he'd be happy.

Pilling told the newspapers Muzz would play Saginaw; he heard they were preparing to play against him. "We were very different," says Irons, "Murray was relaxed, never had a bad goal scored on him." Pilling observed that Robbie had a ties/losses record with Saginaw, while Muzz had two or three wins.

Muzz took the warmup. As the game was about to begin, Robbie learned from the public address system that he would be starting. Gregg was trying to reach him first, but failed. Robbie's reaction was, "Why didn't you tell me?" as he ran for his vomit can. Everyone was off balance, except Muzz, who had been let in on the plan.

Saginaw wondered what happened to Muzz, and after four minutes, Pilling sent him out and called Robbie in. Robbie thought it was to break the tension, but it was simply a line change. After a while, Gregg changed them again.

"Muzz made a couple of killer saves," says Gregg happily. The crowd, and the Saginaw team, were distracted. Their coach, Fred Perry, was fuming. They changed on the fly; Robbie says, "Marcel Comeau was coming down the ice and was so startled, he lost momentum." In all, Pilling made nine switches.

Saginaw's focus slipped. "We were loose, watching what was happening," laughs Ewasiuk, and the result was a 2-0 win for the K's. Saginaw outshot them three to one, especially when the goal seemed empty, but the puck went wild. "They forgot to beat us," says Pilling.

The Fort Wayne fans demanded to see the revolving goalies for themselves, so Pilling tried it once at the Coliseum. Muzz was in goal

and badboy Joe Nathe of Toledo was in front, screening him. Muzz was whacking him and he was getting mad. With four minutes to go, Pilling made the change, and Murray and Robbie almost collided in mid-ice. When Joe took his place in front of the goal again, Robbie murmured, "Joe," and Nathe, expecting Bannerman to be behind him, not Irons, was so surprised he left the ice. About the revolving goalies technique, Irons is uncertain. "It breaks the concentration, but Murray was okay with it, because he was a cocky kid."

Returning to the road trip, after Saginaw the K's were due a party, and two busloads of Fort Wayne fans had come up to help them. "We partied all night," said Norris, "We got to Grand Rapids to play in the afternoon. Kono [Penasse] didn't go to bed, he could run or skate forever, never got tired. It was a zoo in the dressing room, guys hung over, maybe tipsy. Gregg looked at us and said, 'I think we'd better go to 3 sets of wingers.' We dumped the puck at center and waited. Kono scored four goals and we won."

Gregg says, "I turned a blind eye. Kono was still drunk. D'Arcy puked in a corner on the ice. Everybody left him alone on the bench, everyone was green. We hung on and won, but it was pretty quiet on the bus. They were all asleep. You have men playing a children's game, you get a star for a job well done. It was a group of guys you could do that with." Ewasiuk laughs and adds, "Straight out of *Slapshot*."

Kono's simple account is, "We needed the points, we just partied and we were still going. Some guys were late. No one said a word. Gregg was like that. I had four goals, it should have been seven. I was careless or we wouldn't have missed those goals. We blew them away."

It was a raucous year. Pilling had a bucket of beer dumped on him in Dayton, and chased the man from the rink. Laird struck an obnoxious woman in Toledo during a brawl outside the arena. The IHL commissioner called Pilling onto the carpet after a suspicious goal. Gregg commented, "There was a huge fan reaction. The Coliseum was packed at the next game."

The K's top scorer in 1977-78 was Dan Bonar, a rookie. He'd played junior in Brandon, Manitoba, with Doug Johnston. "He was always a scorer, shot a lot," says Doug, "He had a confidence that he could overcome his mistakes, make up for it. That's unusual and it helps, you don't fall apart. People like that do well in later life, too."

Pilling scouted Dan and he agreed to come for a tryout. On arrival, he was unimpressed, but he told himself, "If I like it, I'll stay. If I don't, I'll go to university." Two weeks later he was leading the scoring.

Irons observed, "He was a strong skater, not as much finesse with the puck as Walker, but he made it to the NHL. It was his strength that did it." Dan says that the scoring and skating were the same in junior and later, but he was more aggressive here than he had been.

After his starry year on a line with Dumba and Norris, he spent a couple of restless seasons in the AHL before making it to the LA Kings. "He was famous for shadowing Gretzky while he was on the Kings," says Pilling. A broken arm brought his NHL career to an abrupt end.

Dan took home two trophies for his Komets year, for most valuable player and rookie of the year. It was the third year in a row the K's had the league's top rookie. "We were only paid \$7500," says Dan. "When I was leaving to get married, Colin Lister presented me with a bonus of \$1000. I really appreciated it." That year was his favorite, he says, playing for Gregg, Ken and Colin.

"We should have won the cup," says Irons. "Of the twelve years I played here, that was the year we should have won." They had to settle for being the league champs. Penasse says, "You don't win many championships at any level. Millions play hoping for the NHL, few win a single championship. The majority never do, and it matters. How many NHL players never win a Stanley Cup?" Laird commented, "Championships start from the top down. The attitude is at the top and finds it way down." There seems little doubt that the players of 1977-78 were given their chance by Gregg Pilling.

Terry Ewasiuk sums it up: "It was my most enjoyable year playing hockey. The guys had pride, fun and success. Coaching wins championships and humor is why. I learned this from Gregg, he motivates players this way. He knows that players had their best years with him, but not because of him, because of team spirit." Said Norris, "We got 97 points, and coaching made the difference. The fans liked us." And Penasse: "I was just having fun."

The players had not been told about the huge loan Ulliyot had taken out the year before, but when they did hear about it, they understood that the success of 1977-78 had helped to pay it off.

Year of the Moose

The sudden departure of Gregg Pilling at the end of 1977-78 opened the way for the return of a legend. It was a return in the sense that he had been to Fort Wayne many times before, as an opposing player.

Moose Lallo had a twenty-year playing career, largely in the EHL and IHL, the later years as player-coach in Muskegon where he led one of the toughest lines in the league. He was famous for playing without pads in the 1950s. His viewpoint and style of coaching were old-fashioned and familiar, and he worked well with Ken Ullyot.

The Journal Gazette always described him as 'colorful' and 'a Fort Wayne nemesis' during his playing days. The players agreed. Bobby Rivard said, "He was a dirty player, rough. You couldn't stand in front of the net or he'd take you out, put you on the ice." Cal remembers Moose picking up Chick Balon off the ice with one hand, and hitting him. Not surprisingly, Moose and Con Madigan had some toe-to-toes.

George Stanutz had known Moose from boyhood days in Timmins. "I played against him here and in the east," he said, "He was like a bull rushing up the ice, and if you took the puck away from him, he'd get mad. I went around him and scored and he said, 'You won't do that again!' So in the third period I did it again. Once you had him faked, he couldn't turn."

However, no one who saw Muskegon play in the early sixties doubted that he knew what he was doing. Rory Cava said, "We appreciated what he'd been through, who he was."

"His coaching style was like a grizzly bear," said Irons, "Gentle, then blow. If you didn't give a hundred percent, you knew it."

Trainer Joe Franke found Moose very demanding. "He'd say, 'This guy's hurt. Get him ready to play.' Moose's philosophy was, if you're not bleeding, you're playing. He had played sick and he expected it of them." He did learn a lot from Moose about the game.

Kotsopoulos said, "He was fun to play for, but not a great communicator." Laird said, "A great contrast after Pilling. He was straightforward, blunt and to the point. You wanted to work for the guy." Al Dumba agreed, "He was very good to me, played me a lot. He put me on the ice at times I could do well, so I could perform. I didn't find him as rigid as people said. I used to go for breaks with him, we'd talk. This made me think of coaching down the road."

Not everyone was so sanguine. Mike Penasse said, "I closed my eyes and ears and played. He was not a coach for the 80s." "I didn't play

for Moose, that's why I quit," said Terry Pembroke, "That stuff, you play for guts, for glory, that's no good with kids in the 80s." Doug Johnston said, "He reacted badly to every goal against." Dave Norris, who felt Moose made him the whipping boy, said he hated the negativity.

Attitudes had changed, although many coaches continued to have curfews and make suggestions about players' private lives. "He tried to say don't go out at night," said Pembroke. "Twenty five guys said, 'Get lost.'" Only a few years before, Keller had told his players not to have sex before a game, with similar results.

There are many tales about Moose's vocabulary, and a famous story about a practice in Des Moines. The trainer asked, "Is this practice mandatory?" and Moose replied, "Hell no, they all skate." Whether it's true or not, everybody believes it.

Dumba, Laird and McDougall were known as the Western Union line, because they were all from western Canada. "We had a very special chemistry, on and off the ice," said Laird, "We had a sense when we were on the ice. I could get the puck to Terry on the breakouts in our own end. When we were attacking the net, he knew how to get it to me. I concentrated on getting it to the net." Said Dumba, "Nobody tried to push us around, because nobody challenged Robbie Laird."

In the game of 25 December, the Western Union scored four of the six goals, but with injuries serious enough to have sat the game out. On 25 February 1979, the K's beat Flint 7-6. Flint had a 6-4 lead until 15:49 of the third period, when Dumba scored. At 18:45, Laird tied it. Dumba scored the winner at 19:29 on assists by Laird and McDougall.

A Komets program for 17 October 1981 summarized the accomplishments of the Western Union: "1978-79 for the only time in the history of the IHL, one complete line from a single hockey team was voted as the all-star forwards in the final season voting for league honors by the coaches and general managers. With Terry McDougall at center scoring 139 points on 57 goals and 82 assists, Al Dumba on his right wing finishing third in scoring with 46 goals and 65 assists for 111 points and Robbie Laird on left wing finishing seventh in IHL stats with 45 goals and 62 assists for 107 points, the three formed the first all star forward line." It was the second most prolific line to play in the IHL, topped only by the Jet Line in 1965-66. The Western Union accounted for 357 total points, the Jet Line's total was 364.

After the championship season of 1977-78, many guys had the chance to move. Ewasiuk, McNeice and Pembroke retired. There was a

lot of player movement throughout the year. "I went all year without a centerman," said Norris, "Moose made a big trade for Barry Scully, but he couldn't find a centerman. It was a donut line with me and Scully."

In 1979-80, the K's won their division and went all the way to the finals, losing to Kalamazoo 4 games to 2. Al Dumba won the MVP and scoring trophies and the top US rookie was goalie Bob Janecyk. He and Robbie Irons had split the games between them.

In 1980-81, Saginaw put the K's out of business in the semifinals. Goalie Steve Janaszak shared top US rookie honors with Mike Labianca of Toledo.

"The dynamics of the Komets changed with Moose," said Norris, "We're always searching to have a family feeling. We had it with Ralph and Gregg, but with Moose we were all out for ourselves." At the end of the 1980-81 season, Moose was fired, to be replaced by Ron Ulliyot. "I thought it was unfortunate that he left," said Irons, "I might have played another year if he'd stayed. I've seen coaches with worse records than Moose and didn't get fired."

Al Dumba

A Saskatchewan farm boy, Al Dumba began skating at seven, on the sloughs near his house and on ice in the back yard. He was soon playing hockey. Rob Tudor grew up nearby and they were on the same team as boys together. Their fathers drove them to the games in those far-flung prairie towns. They played on provincial championship teams at twelve and fourteen years old. "That brought the scouts out," says Al. They went to the Regina Pats, the oldest junior hockey franchise in Canada, where Al played for four years from the age of sixteen. It's a prestigious team and other K's had played there too, including Rob Laird and Dave Faulkner.

"On the Pats, I was supposed to be the next Robbie Laird," said Al, "He was tenacious and worked hard, and I copied him, wanted to be like him, the ultimate team guy."

Tudor and Dumba lived together in Regina. Living away from home and responsible for playing winning games, junior hockey players have to mature fairly soon, says Al. It's important to have good billets, but it's still hard to have passing grades in school. "By the time we were 19, we were more mature than most," he says, "In pro there's lots of leadership and young men need it. I was only 20 when I was in Dayton."

Dumba was drafted by the Washington Capitals in 1976. "I was in awe at the training camp," he said, "The first week is intimidating. There were a few high draft picks I knew. I roomed with veteran Bob Paradise, he helped me get integrated into the team completely." Dumba found he needed work in some areas, strength, skating, confidence and experience in general. "That's how I developed as a player here."

He went to Dayton. For his first exhibition game against the Komets, he was sent out for the faceoff. Opposite him was Rob Tudor. "We stood there grinning at each other. The linesmen were baffled, they didn't know what was going on," laughs Al.

In his first league game, he decided to prove himself, so he fought Dave Norris three times. "I didn't know Norris was famous," he says now. He quickly discovered that 'scoring goals was more fun than fighting,' although his year in Dayton he had more PIM than any other season in his career. He had a good year, with more than thirty goals and 67 points. As the season ended, the Gems folded. In the dispersal draft, he was picked up by Fort Wayne.

In his second Capitals training camp, he injured some rib cartilage five days in, so he was sent straight to the IHL. His first season here started slowly. "I'm not a natural scorer," he says. "But I never got out-worked. I was lucky in my linemates [Dan Bonar and Dave Norris]. We helped one another out, and Dave got more than thirty goals that year, too."

Bonar remembers, "He played honest hockey, nothing fancy, he was a hard working farmer. Midseason he came to me, said he was in a slump, couldn't score. We did drills in practice and I told him I knew why. He was shooting the puck at the same height all the time, two feet off the ground. That's right into the goalie's glove. I told him to move it around. His scoring soared." Penasse remembers his slow start, too, "He was a penalty killer, but he matured, Gregg helped him get going."

Pilling comments, "He could play in the traffic. He had high skills and was tough. Farm kids are used to dealing with the unknown, animals are unpredictable. Al was willing to roll up his sleeves and get scuffed up. Players liked playing with him. Also he was very fortunate in his wife, she was a big help to him."

Doug Johnston, who had played against Al in the WCHL, made this assessment: "He's a quiet leader, respected. He worked hard every game. He was good in junior, but he'd pass when he should have shot. It was a team thing—the three of them made a cohesive unit that year."

In the 1979-80 season, Al played on a line with McDougall and Norris. "I loved to play with him," says Norris, "He gave 110% every game. He worked his butt off. He was the goal scorer that year. It was our second year with Moose. Ken wouldn't release me to go to Europe, so I came back and I had a great year. Al was the scoring champion. The fans might not even notice him, but he was always in position and ready to play in the corners. Terry could feed him and I was mostly there to protect those two guys."

Al was also the captain that year. "The captain's job is to make sure the team is solid in the dressing room, and that they stick together off the ice after the game. The role of captain is to be an intermediary between players and coaches. There was nothing for me to deal with."

As the end of the season approached, "Moose wanted me to win the scoring title so bad," says Al, "I was 3 or so points up. Moose said we're gonna get you the puck. I didn't want this. In the end, I got an assist in the last game. It was legit." Neal Colvin remembers, "The last week-end of the season, Al had a goal and 4 assists. He won the scoring title by 8 points over Tom Milani of Kalamazoo. The final game of the season, Al had one assist. Kalamazoo only scored one goal in their final regular season game, so Dumba had a pretty good lead in the point race." As well as the Lamoureux scoring trophy, Al won the league's MVP award. He heard the news back home in a phone call from Bob Chase.

With this triumph behind him, Al went to the LA Kings training camp in the fall of 1981. "I'd won those trophies, I'd been a two year all-star, I had a good training camp. I felt good. I felt I could play in the NHL," he says, "Then they were going to send me to Houston. I came back here, but I was upset with hockey. It was eating me up, so I left and went home to help my dad on the farm. It was a rash decision." However, in personal terms, it turned out for the best. He continued coaching and teaching hockey, and does color for the Regina Pats games. He also still plays rec hockey with Rob Tudor.

Al Dumba clearly gained the confidence he thought he'd lacked originally. "He was very quiet off the ice," said Chase. "But he led by example on the ice." "He's a quality human being who never talks about himself," said Pembroke, and Laird added, "He was good all round, he could score, he knew where to be and worked both ends." Chase's final assessment is, "He was like Len Thomson. If he'd stayed, he'd have been in the top twenty players who'd ever been here."

Barry Scully

Everyone says so: Barry Scully could score from anywhere. "I remember him on his butt, on his knees, on his back," said Ron Leef, "On the blue line at the boards, he rifled it over the goalie's shoulders with a wrist shot."

His wrists were very strong, a fact he enjoyed demonstrating. "That's what he was," said Laird, "Big hands and wrists." His shot was hard, fast and accurate, making him a pure goal scorer, with a 'knack for knowing where to go and when to move' according to Eddie Long, with a heavy shot 'that would leave a sting in the goalie's glove.' As well as the wrist shot, he had a quick snapshot. "He scored a lot of goals with his wrist shot," said Kotsopoulos, "It's the best I've seen in hockey, the NHL too, very accurate. He was a natural talent." Norris pointed out, "He had an NHL shot. He could shoot from either foot. He had an uncanny ability to find a position."

"Blindfolded he could put the puck in the net. He scored on his stomach," said Steve Fletcher. Hilworth remembered, "He could score on his head. He could! Put him in front of the net and he'd score. Even after the shot he'd take a rebound. He'd take the other guys' rebounds too. He was always in front of the net." Goalie Irons stated, "I was glad he was on my team. He was feared everywhere." The fans liked it too; Gary Gardner said, "You were always watching because he might score."

Martin Burgers remembered, "You wouldn't see him in the whole game, then at the end he'd have two goals and an assist with that quick release wrist shot and you'd think, 'What the hell!' He'd be in the right place at the right time." "He was gifted," said Ron Ulyot, "It would go in any way, tipped off his ankle..." Bob Chase described the phenomenon: "The puck could be flying by. If he was lying down, he'd flick his stick and it would go in. He could have been in the NHL."

The stick might have made a difference. "He had the weirdest stick," said Hilworth, "A mile long with a huge blade." "It was a big, heavy stick," agreed Laird, "With a big curve. His curve was deemed illegal a few times."

In his four full seasons with the K's, Barry had more than 100 points every year, but never more than 40 PIM. A 1981 Komets program stated, "Last year Barry registered the league high in goals scored at 69, his four year total of 253 goals including playoff action gives Barry an average of 63 goals per year. He is the first player to score more than 200 goals in his first four years in the league."

Why did he spend his career in the I? "He liked lots of fun," said Leef, "He enjoyed hockey but it got in the way of fun." His off-ice lifestyle was not suited to athletics. "There was a lot of drinking and not a lot of working out by everyone at this time," said Rigler. "Players didn't receive as much support then as they do now," said Laird, "The coach needs to be a motivational psychologist. If he'd had that, he'd have been in the NHL."

When Brant Kiessig was playing in Muskegon, he was assigned to Scully. "My job was to keep Barry Scully off the scoreboard. I was always draped all over him. If you met him in the street, you'd think he was a guy who couldn't even carry a hockey stick. He defied any logic, he didn't conform to what [the NHL teams] were looking for. He actually looked in worse shape than he was." When Brant moved to Fort Wayne, Barry and Linda Scully took him and the other young men in. "They were unpretentious, so good to us."

Scully was on a line with George Kotsopoulos and Gary DeLonge. Kotsy and Scully had that sixth sense of knowing what the other guy would do. "He'd say before a game," says George, "Let's get this many points tonight," then he'd do it. George is proud that Barry scored his goals with himself at center. Then he shakes his head, "Maybe he's one of those players who got hit in the head too many times." Al Dumba enjoyed playing with him, too: "The year I won the scoring race, Barry was a big part of that. We were on the power play together. I got a lot of assists on his power play goals. He could get rid of it fast."

"He was the team character," said Burgers, "He liked the Three Stooges and would imitate them. He'd be the guy in town everybody knew." Trainer Joe Franke remembers a road trip in Milwaukee. "We were staying at a Holiday Inn, a nice hotel. There was a bar across the street. Barry wanted to go and I warned him it was after curfew. He had to go. Coming back, Barry had a six-pack in his suit. I told him not to go in the hotel lobby, but he did. Moose wasn't there, what a relief. Then the elevator door opened, and Moose was hiding in there! Barry jumped and beer cans started falling on the floor. Moose didn't play him for two games. He fined us, and he got the money, too. After that, Barry got the beer ahead of time."

It is difficult to sum up Barry. Rigler said, "He was labeled early on as a problem and no one would give him a chance later." Ron Ulyot said, "He just wanted to play and score goals." Kotsopoulos, who played with him so closely, added, "He was the most talented I played with, but

he wasn't disciplined enough." Those hundred point seasons still speak for themselves. Arriving for his third season with the K's in 1983, Rob Motz was asked if he had received any honors. He replied, "Playing hockey with Barry Scully."

The Celebrity

Ron Leef was twenty when he went to the Vancouver Canucks training camp in 1981. It was not a great experience and he was sent to Dallas. He had a good game in Fort Worth and thought he was going there, but found himself in Fort Wayne, instead. "My first impression was that it was awful," he said.

"We almost didn't keep him," says Ron Ulyot. "We were told he was good, but he was down mentally and it wasn't good. I brought him on the bus to Toledo with us. Someone got hurt so I went looking for him. I found him at a coney stand eating a hot dog. I had him dress, he played great and it went from there." In his first season here, Ron did well, with 29 goals and 71 points and was IHL rookie of the year. He was surprised not to be asked to the Canucks training camp in 1982, so he returned to Fort Wayne. 1982-83 saw him soaring to 57 goals and 120 points. It was his finest year.

He was on a line with Dale Baldwin and Rob Motz. It was a magical combination. Ron says, "We were three totally different guys. Motz was fast and could put the puck in the net. A good line has one to set it up, one to put it in and one who was rough and tough. We had one play that worked. On the breakout, Baldwin got the puck and sent it to me. Motz went between the defensemen and I slipped the puck to him. He'd have a breakaway. When it was only Rob and the goalie, he'd get it in. My only problem was catching up with him." At other times, Rigler replaced Baldwin on the line.

In addition to scoring, Ron was one of the most high-profile members of the team. "He was a goal scorer, a celebrity. Goal scorers get a lot of attention anyway," said Stever Fletcher. Leef was popular with fans, charismatic according to Laird. This was helped both by his effervescent personality and his modeling career. "He'd blow kisses to the fans when he was a star," said Kotsopoulos. "And he was always laughing, he'd laugh at his own jokes." Ads in the Komets programs show him wearing a fur coat for Daseler Furs and in a hair style from Majestic Mr & Ms North. There was a Ron Leef Fan Club, which sold autographed photo buttons headed Leefer! with a heart in the bottom of

the exclamation point and a soulful shot of Ron (price \$5). Perhaps his best known modeling job was for Speedo bathing suits, with a number of attractive women. Fletcher commented, "We told him, get that roll of quarters out of there."

The important thing was that on the ice, he gave one hundred percent every year and was an outstanding offensive player. Ron Ullyot said, "He was always upbeat and led by example. He could always come up with the good big play. He was a little guy but was never intimidated. He tested me, joking and having too good a time, but he was our marquee player. That was okay, appealing to ladies was good marketing, brought people in."

From his teammates point of view, he was a good people person, great with fans and possessing one of the best wrist shots ever, said Doug Rigler. He didn't fight much, he says, because he had small hands, "I knew if I hurt them, I couldn't score." His off-ice life was also glamorous. He, Jim Burton and Martin Burgers roomed together and Martin commented, "What an apartment! We did all the wrong things at the wrong time and in the wrong place!" John Baldassari remembered, "What pranks! He was ready for anything, his idea or someone else's. He didn't worry, Dale would take it home." Scoring and popularity formed a recipe to make him one of the most memorable of 80s players.

His biggest game came on 4 December 1982 against Kalamazoo at the Coliseum, with only 3700 fans on hand to see it. Goal one came in the first period. Goal two came from Ken Goodwin to Dale Baldwin, who made a cross-rink pass to Ron. He beat Georges Gagnon on the stick side. A rebound of a Baldwin shot went over Gagnon's shoulder for goal three, and Kim Study commented in the *Journal Gazette*, "His traditional leap into the air signalled an eruption of the crowd." Mike Clarke was the only K who had scored a hat trick up to that point that season.

Goal four was a long shot in the third period. Goal five followed. Leef told Study, "Baldy gave me a good pass and I took a shot, the rebound bounced high and I hacked it in." Gagnon argued that Ron's stick had been too high but ref Chuck Nisbet okayed it.

In her later comment column, Study said, "Leef was so excited at that point [after the fourth goal] he stood along the boards behind the net and jumped up and down. He didn't know he wasn't finished yet." A sixth goal almost happened as Motz passed to Leef in front of the open side of the net but K-Wings defenseman Doug Poirier checked him.

Feeling robbed, Leef fought Poirier. They both received fighting majors, but Leef had a standing ovation as he left the ice.

On 9 February 1983, Ron scored four goals, once again against the K-Wings. The second, early in the third period, bounced off Gagnon's collar bone, which left his glove arm wobbly. Leef scored two more that period, and Scully one, as Gagnon had trouble moving his arm quickly. The Coliseum had only a miserable 1600 witnesses to Leef's second triumph of the season.

Ron's knees began to give out and after back surgery in 1986, he had to slow down. "I wanted to play one more year and I did, but I was sorry to finish on such a low note. I was skating well but I didn't have a line." David Franke's assessment was, "If he hadn't been injured, he would have gone on playing for us and broken some records."

Off the Ice

Only a small part of the player's time was spent on the ice, and a lot of off-ice time was directly connected to being a Komet.

The first question after settling onto the team would be: where to live? The earliest players stayed at the Van Orman Hotel while they found a house, an apartment, or a room somewhere. Later players were put up at the Gerber House which was handy to the Coliseum, although there was nothing else out there at the time. Another advantage was that the owner, Gary Gerber, was a big Komet fan.

Unmarried players often shared a house or apartment. In the mid-sixties there was a 'rookie house' (John Bloom's term) where four players—Alton White, Gerry Sillers, Bob Howard and Ken Sutyla—lived. They called it The Ponderosa. Bloom thought it a 'fine party house' also. Gunnar Elliott would send over cases of beer courtesy of AALCO and many of the married players dropped round for visits.

Sharing a house might also mean sharing a car. Gus Braumberger and Bob McCusker found themselves without transport when they lived on Anthony near the viaduct. Fortunately Orrin Gould had a waitress friend who was willing to part with a car for \$100. It ran fine, although it had no muffler and the upholstery was torn. They used it all winter. "It would always go in the cold when we got back from a road trip," says Gus, "Although sometimes at home we had trouble getting it going. We'd just push it out on the street and get a push from another car." They saved money by putting used oil in it and when the season ended, sold it back to the waitress for the same \$100.

The players' wives often felt isolated when they first arrived in a strange city. They banded together for support, said Vivian Stanutz, and Stella Kastelic agreed. "The wives took me in and I loved Fort Wayne. Everyone was young together and away from home. We were a moral support for each other."

The wives all attended the games and sat in a group. "It was Ken's rule," said Shirley Maisonneuve, "We had to be there. He said, 'You expect the fans to come, wives must too.'" The advantage was that they got to know one another quickly that way. Ted Wright's wife Betty would come, but she would leave if he fought, and take the kids out, too. In the nineties, management no longer had expectations about wives, but some players did want their spouses at the games. "The wives would be there in a group, coming and going," said Carey Lucyk.

There were often parties on Mondays, the players' day off, when everyone would bring pot luck. "It was a chance to unwind," said Stella, "We'd leave all the kids with one sitter." The single guys did not sit at home, either. "Mondays we'd play pool or go bowling, we were always out. The married guys would have us over," said Dave Richardson.

As for girlfriends, the players didn't have to look far. "There were always girls," said Jack Loser, "The only difference is that then the players would have to ask them. Now the girls ask."

The attitude to conditioning has changed over the years. Merv Dubchak said, "We didn't stay in shape all year. We came to training camp to get in shape. Some guys weren't in shape till Christmas." Ulyot said he was surprised by how out of shape some players were at his first training camp. Stubby went on, "I was better because I had some hard work in the summer, shifting beer cases every day in the heat." Chuck Adamson played handball and did running in the fall. When the weather was bad, he and Lionel Repka would run the stairs in the Coliseum.

Today, there is a regimen dictated by team management and augmented by the players' own preferences. Jim Logan describes it: "A trainer at the gym puts us through a circuit. It's important that everyone does the training. Your body wears down a little and it helps. There are stretches, pushups and situps at the end. Guys are burning and can hardly manage it, but he makes us. In the off-season, it's mostly weight training and similar. You can't do it in the season because your body is beat up. We work on shoulders, back, mostly upper body. We skate every day so our legs are okay."

As for talk about nutrition, Kelly Hurd says, "That came only after 1995. Nobody worried earlier when the players got bigger and more physical." Over the years, there has been a shift in pregame meals. Norm Waslawski's early sixties meal would be steak and a baked potato, but no sweets. Ted Wright would have a steak the night before, but not the day of a game. He had poached eggs at three in the afternoon. In the eighties, George Kotsopoulos still ate steak or prime rib at noon, with nothing more till after the game. Kelly Hurd found that midday pasta was a nineties meal. Pasta began replacing meat in the late sixties, when carbs rather than protein became the rule.

For everyone, the meal would be followed by a nap to allow for digestion and a good rest before going to the rink late in the afternoon. After the game there was more leeway, although Norm said he confined himself to eggs and toast. If Ted Wright needed a pick me up between periods, he'd have rum on a sugar cube.

One day before a game, Ken Ullyot caught Gerry Randall eating grilled cheese and drinking a coke. The rule was, no eating after three. Ken said, "All I can say, Randall, is you better play well tonight." Gerry says he thinks he did.

During the 1993 Turner Cup playoffs, Kelly Hurd, Bob Jay and Dave Smith ate the same meal before every game. "We used to eat at the Olive Garden," says Kelly. "Always the same food, I had chicken parmesan. We'd even hum a few bars of the same song, American Girl." That was to help win the cup. Does he still like chicken parmesan? "I don't eat it any more. I don't even like pasta any more."

Hockey players are notorious for their superstitions, and the K's are no different. Most of them seem more eager to describe other people's than their own, however. Goalies seem to have more than anyone else, and a number of them need to vomit before a game—Irons in particular, but also Dan Sanscartier and others.

"Everyone had some superstition," said Steve Fletcher. Doug Rigler pointed out that no one played tricks before a game, "that's a serious time." During practice instead, maybe. Also, "if things were good, you didn't change anything. If things were bad, you would change everything." The most common pregame activity is taping sticks.

Here are some Komet pregame habits or superstitions:

Steve Fletcher: I left the ice with one minute left in warmup, listened to the same song going to the game if they'd won the night before, always put my equipment on the same way. (Kelly Hurd added

that Fletch would always work on his stick, 'funny for a guy whose stick was on the ice with his gloves half the time.')

Shawn Evans came at 2.30 and put on his uniform three or four times till he got it right.

Doug Rigler: I always got everything on left to right. If my skates felt too narrow, I'd often take off skates, shoulder pads and elbow pads, even when they fit.

Steve Salvucci practiced juggling and magic. He was the last to get dressed, a fast dresser.

Len Thomson: A guy with the same birthday as mine gave me a four leaf clover. I scored a hat trick. After that I bought one every week and slipped it in my glove.

George Kotsopoulos always put his left skate on the ice first.

Stubby Dubchak: Walking out of the dressing room, I'd hit my stick three times on the doorway. This was only in the Coliseum. I had to be at the rink ninety minutes early, not sooner or later. I would sit 45 minutes before dressing, dress in a certain order. If I was scoring, I wouldn't wash my underwear. Sometimes Ken would make me wash everything.

Moose Lallo would never shake your hand before a game.

Ted Wright didn't talk the day of a game.

Pokey Reddick would change his underwear after each period.

Jean Marc Richard had to be on the ice one minute ahead of time, go straight to center and do a ninety degree turn.

Bruce Boudreau had four sticks on the bench, changed in the same order.

Bruce Racine had two sticks, one used in practice, one in the game.

Bob Essensa always had the same spare stick, it was like a security blanket.

After the game the players could relax. John Hilworth remembered, "I went home after the game, but other guys would go to Our Place, the Hobby House, the Sands, Wrigley Field." Ian Boyce said that he and Grant Richison went to the Downtown Bar & Grill, Columbia Street, Piere's (on Saturday), Wrigley Field (on Sunday). Kotsy and friends went to Our Place, Rumours, or Banditos if they wanted to eat too. In the 70s, Fish of Stroh's was popular; they were K's sponsors.

The 1952 team went to Miller's Tavern on State across the bridge from North Side High School. "We had draft beer and ham sandwiches," said Len Wharton, "They were the greatest."

From the sixties, Waslawski mentioned the State Street Bar & Grill, the Gilded Cage, Gerber House, Hartley's, Fairfield Inn. "The most common was the North Star. It was big enough to accommodate everybody. It was great, the guys stuck together and everybody would be there." They often played shuffleboard at the North Star.

Len Thornson remembered the North Star too. "It was off the beaten track because fans might think you drink too much." Vi Ulliot remembers a winter day after morning practice, when there had been a light snow. Ken followed the car tracks to the North Star.

Joe Kastelic spoke of Hughie's Tap (run by former Zollner Piston Hugh Johnston, later Neal Barille's Oyster Bar, always a sportsman's favorite), the Trolley Bar and 'that rib place on State.' Gerry Randall preferred Alexander's for pizza and beer.

Of all the places the hockey players went, the one they mention most often is the Shady Nook on Parnell. "We loved the Shady Nook. She made homemade vegetable soup with carrots. Six or seven of us would go there after practice," said Lionel Repka. "After the game, it was the Shady Nook for chili and a beer," said Waslawski. "Bob and Nancy Hartman ran it," remembered Stubby. "He made the bean soup." Reno Zanier lived only a few doors away and went there often with his family.

A difficulty was that the Shady Nook was close to the Coliseum and Ken Ulliot had rules about the players drinking in public. On Mondays, the players would meet at ten to skate, steam and shower, and then go out. ("Tuesday at practice we would sweat it out and be back in shape by Wednesday," said Ted Wright.) After seeing players in the Shady Nook once too often, Ken declared it out of bounds for Komets. The guys still found a place to have a beer, a necessity to replace the liquid they'd lost playing. "Sometimes we'd order two the first time, we needed the liquid," said Primeau. "Some people were shocked."

The Sands Motel on Coliseum was a favorite place in the seventies and eighties. "I went there all the time. There were lots of free drinks," said Gregg Pilling. "They got season tickets. The training camp was billeted there." There were often free meals for the players, too.

Married players sometimes preferred to go home. Reno Zanier said that they would take turns having people over after games. When it

was his turn, the Zaniers were expected to make spaghetti, which Reno cooked on a gas burner in the basement. "Then Andy Voykin would heap pepper on it and start to sweat," he laughs.

There were also team meetings, informal occasions without the coach. These might be used to thrash out a problem, but they might be something less, too. "Oh, 'team meetings,'" says Todd Strueby, laughing, "Sure, we'd phone home and say, sorry, I have a 'team meeting.' We'd go out for a few drinks and have lunch." He went on to explain that these were important for team bonding and morale, however. Of sixties team meetings, Goodwin said, "We'd get together for a beer, have plain talk. It was good." He confirmed the bonding, too, describing it as 'staying together, living and dying together.'

The players were involved in promotions, too, both for the team and for businesses and charities around town. In the early days, Ernie Berg did most of the talking when they went to churches or clubs, but a player or two would go along for question and answer sessions of ten or fifteen minutes. "At church outings or banquets, the food was great," said George Drysdale. He gave an example of the questions:

"What's the difference between playing in Fort Wayne and Toledo?"

"You can get to the other end quicker in Toledo." [Because of the smaller rink.]

A boy named Mark Buscher was sick in Parkview Hospital. The team got a call from his parents, so Gus and Eddie went to see him. After that, Mark always asked, "Did the Komets win? Did Gus or Eddie score?" The hospital phoned to tell them, and Eddie and Gus took him a stick. Gus said, "It was one of the nicest things that ever happened to me in my life."

As well as the service groups and churches, Norm Waslawski mentioned working for a grocery chain, promoting both groceries and hockey, and signing autographs. The Maloley's employees would get involved as fans. Was he comfortable with public speaking? He says no, but he got better at it.

Ted Wright said that Ken and Colin made the arrangements, and the players simply had to show up. Once when both he and Gerry Randall were injured, they went to a service club in Auburn.

Ted had a regular heckler at the games. His wife had told him there was a guy at the games who would be shouting at him even when he wasn't playing, "Nice play, you bum." When he was in Auburn, he

was talking to a man in his late fifties who invited him to sit with him at the next game, in section 10. Ted did, and it turned out to be his heckler. The man never booed him again.

In the eighties, there were lots of promotions, said Doug Rigler, "But we got paid for them, \$10-\$15 or so. We did K-Mart, the newspapers, Allen County Ford, Stahlsmith Appliances, Forest Park Marathon. The Allen County Ford appearances paid \$100 a player for a couple of hours work. On school visits we would talk to an assembly, motivational speeches about education. At St. John's in New Haven I signed autographs till I got writer's cramp. Some places we'd put on our hockey gear and give out tickets."

Doug Teskey said, "We go talking to schoolkids a lot. I asked what do they want to do. If you can motivate a couple of kids to believe they can accomplish something or even set goals, then it's worth it. We used to go twice a month. I did this in college too."

The king of promotions was Ron Leef, who had an extensive modeling career in tandem with hockey. "I did a swimwear spread in the papers, Dean Musser did the photographs at Club Olympia. I did a tanning club too. I was so dark in January people made racial slurs. There wasn't a lot of money in it, but the identification was good.

"My first year, people knew me. When I retired, they still knew me. Two or three years later, they don't know you. The extra stuff took me from a minor pro player going nowhere to putting me in this city for life. I did schools and hospitals, not everybody did. Some guys didn't like it. Some guys are just here to play. I wanted to enjoy myself too."

"I think that most of us believed in doing service things," said Carey Lucyk, "We'd show up to bag groceries at Scotts for the Cancer Society, go on hospital visits, do bars or restaurants for friends who needed you. It was good for everyone. And we were always friendly and accessible for autographs."

"Not everyone is suitable for doing the promotions," observed Bob Chase, "But they still don't use the players enough in ads. They are there for novelty, mostly. You need someone who has an identity, an Ian Boyce or a Steve Fletcher. Brent Gretzky has been the current one." Gretzky, exuberant as ever, said he enjoyed making the television commercials.

A promotional idea which benefited the team, individual players and local businesses was the awarding of prizes for hat tricks. The owners of Cottage Flowers were hockey fans and had a policy of

delivering a dozen roses to any Komet player who scored a hat trick. This continued for several years in the early days and into the 1960s. When asked how often they had to make the deliveries, Robert Schowe said, "In the good years quite frequently, other times not so many." Now Hardees offers a dinner voucher for a hat trick, and the same to defensemen who get three assists in a game.

Lionel Repka told this story: "Jimmy Bloom would give a free haircut to a player who scored a hat trick. Defensemen never got hat tricks, so I missed out. I had a good game when I got four or five points, and I said to Jimmy, 'How about it?' so he gave me a free haircut."

A majority of the players in the fifties and sixties had their hair cut by Jimmy Bloom. He started barbering at Eddie's Barber Shop, 718 South Harrison, run by Edward R. Abousamra. It was across from the Van Orman, so naturally the Komets went there and Jimmy got to know them. When he set up his own shop out north on Anthony near the Coliseum, the players went with him. His brother Johnny cut hair with him when he wasn't being the K's trainer. John Bloom remembers, "We had a big picture of Reno Zanier on the back wall and a picture of the current team." Asked why Reno, he said, "Because he was the best goalie we had." The players also knew that Jimmy kept cold beer at the shop. He was a big K's fan and was given free passes to the games.

Many players coached juvenile teams in the Parks Board league. At the Tuesday practice, they could be heard comparing their kids' performances over the weekend, and they liked to beat their teammates' teams. "I liked coaching the kids," said Gerry Randall, "Sometimes the parents were problems, bringing the kids late, seeing it as babysitting. I remember one kid acting up, drinking. I saw he had self-esteem problems. I asked him to run some skating drills—I had no more problems on the ice or in the dressing room. I tried it on others, it worked."

Eddie Long thought of it as a good promotion for the Komets, but other players would derive more personal pleasures. Kelly Hurd's son plays now, and he says, "I have so much joy in seeing him play. It gives me flashbacks to when my father would get me dressed, put on my skate guards and then take me down to the ice and take them off."

George Stanutz and Lionel Repka coached the Glenbrook Komets, a team for 19-21 year olds who paid for their own equipment and ice time, playing for the fun of it. "I loved coaching them," George said, "Those games were closer to *Slapshot* than any organized game."

Len Thomson was coaching kids at McMillan. "You'd have some kid's father patting you on the back. 'Put my kid in, put my kid out there.' This one kid had white figure skates, but there was his dad, so I sent him in. I told him to stand in front of the net and go to the blue line but stay out of our end. He scored the winning goal!"

Terry Pembroke coached Jim Joyner's kids in juvenile. Joyner, owner of Jim's Hollywood Bar, was a leader in the black community. Terry asked him about the Komets games, but Joyner said, "We don't go there." Pembroke urged him to bring his kids, so he did, and he was the first black season ticket holder at the Coliseum.

When Alton White joined the Komets in 1965 as the first black player on the team, Joyner invited him to Jim's. Gerry Sillers went along, and ate 'the hottest chicken I've ever had.' Jim had seen Bob Bailey hit Alton and was very concerned about it. The players had to explain that it was all part of the game.

Hockey was not a job that carried you through the year, and the players were not paid enough to coast through the summer. They needed temporary jobs. Some went home, where they might work in the day and play baseball in the evening, but many stayed in Fort Wayne, where generous fans found them employment.

Bobby Rivard worked at Town & Country Market. The bigshots at International Harvester were fans and told the players to apply. Lionel Repka worked security there, drove the ambulance and did welding inspection. He fixed security jobs for Wright, Rivard, Waslawski and Goodwin. Purinton drove for Bunn Trucking.

Eddie Long worked for Pepsi. "Ike Stange ran Pepsi and got jobs for all us guys for years. Staying in one place is such an advantage." Pepsi was, and remains, a big sponsor of the Komets.

One of the greatest player supporters was Gunnar Elliott. Many players worked for AALCO. "He played a huge role," said Chase. A highlight of the players' year was Elliott's annual trip to South Bend, when he took the entire team to a Notre Dame football practice. On the way up the bus stopped in Nappanee and on the way back they had a big meal at Flytraps in Elkhart, all courtesy of Gunnar. Ulliot was not comfortable with the trips and when the K's had a 15 game losing streak, he cancelled the outing. He did not allow the trip again.

Fans also helped players with their post-hockey jobs. John Hilworth retired to drive trucks in Fort Wayne. Bill Richardson worked

at Hageman's Construction in the off season, and even part time in winter.

Dale Baldwin

The word 'hard' is heard when Dale Baldwin's name comes up: hard worker and hard-nosed. "He was a hard worker, tough to read," said Doug Johnston. "He was a hard worker. I hated playing against him, he was so hard-nosed and in your face no matter what," said Todd Strueby. "He had a heart of gold. I can't say enough good things about him," said Penasse.

Dale is 5 foot 10 and his playing weight was 180, but almost everyone refers to him as 'little.' "He's short and had to fight to survive," said Joe Franke. "I met him in Houston, with another little guy. We called them Chip and Dale. He took nothing from anybody," remembered John Hilworth.

Dale marked his arrival at the Komets training camp by fighting with Dave Norris four times. Moose eventually told Norris to leave him alone, but Dave protested that Dale had started it. "He was trying to make a name for himself," says Dave, "If you're going to have a fight in a bar, you'd want him there."

"Dale always picks out the biggest guy on the other team and goes after him," said Martin Burgers, "His attitude was, 'I'm not afraid so you shouldn't be afraid either.' He never got stupid penalties, was not fearful, and was good for the team." Comments on Dale always emphasize the team aspect of his playing, his leadership and his rocklike qualities of support.

"He was in great shape. I'd work out with him and I couldn't move the next day," said Fletcher. "He was a great character guy," said Cava, "He came from division two college hockey, and he'd developed this work ethic. When he first arrived, he wasn't expected to make the team, but he earned his way in and everyone respected him." "He gave 110 percent all the time and was very up front," said Joe Franke.

Ron Leef gave a thoughtful evaluation: "He was a great team leader, always played hard and expected a lot from the guys. He was rough even with his own guys, verbally and physically. You have to have someone like that even though you resent it at the time. Even now I can't forgive him for some things, but there are also things to always be grateful for."

His coach, Ron Ullyot said, "He was hard-nosed, he'd do any thing you asked. If I showed him the leading scorers, he'd smother them. He paid the price in not scoring himself, to follow my instructions. He'd ask, 'Who's going to give us the most pain?' and then shut him down. When we were shorthanded I'd put him on defense and he played great. He played his heart out for me."

Another coach, Rob Laird continued, "We all knew and respected him, but rarely was he the big scorer. He was willing to stand up for his teammates. In the IHL you get sorted out in a hurry. Dale was hard to play against. He was highly thought of throughout the league."

Todd Strueby commented, "You build teams around guys like this."

Changing Ownership

By the early 80s, Ken Ullyot was prepared to surrender his controlling interest in the Komets and retire. After close to twenty-five years of sailing in the uncertain financial waters of minor hockey, it was time for a rest. In 1982, the team had debts of \$150,000, but disaster was averted when Ullyot secured a loan.

Colin Lister, who had been business manager of the K's throughout that time, was prepared to take over. Ullyot transferred his voting stock to Colin, but retained an office. "Ken hadn't been there as much toward the end," said Leef, "And Colin didn't change much when he took over."

Colin carried on as before, but there were debts, secured by his collateral, and owning a sports team is a rich man's game. He made it clear he was looking for investors. When radio marketing entrepreneur Bob Britt came along, prepared to take on the K's in 1985, Colin was pleased. "I was a businessman and when Britt took over with a small down payment, but kept me on to run things, I felt I was in clover," he said. Britt was an idea man and left the day-to-day to Colin. When the Komets filed under Chapter 11 in December 1986, Colin lost everything, but he says, "I'd still have taken it on for those three years, just to keep the Komets going." Britt declared personal bankruptcy in June 1987.

Throughout the 80s, the attendance at games was low, crowds of 3800 on Saturdays and 1500 on Wednesdays being not uncommon. After Britt took over, the players were aware that the team might fold, but Leef says, "We knew we could find somewhere else to play. This wasn't the only place."

"When we got our checks, we raced over to the bank," said Chin. "The last couple of guys wouldn't get paid. They made good on it later." Laird's check also bounced at times. Team suppliers were not paid, including WOWO, who still put on the broadcasts.

However, on the surface things seemed to go well. "The Britts enjoyed the social side of running the club," said Flossie Zimmerman, although Britt forbade the Zimmermans to communicate with their long-time associates and friends, the Ullyots.

Britt changed the logo from the traditional orange to a big blue K. When David Welker took over, it changed again, to an Indiana map with his trademark koala bear.

The Britt bankruptcy in the summer of 1987 left Lister, Ullyot and the estate of Ramon Perry among the principal creditors, with a number of the Komets' suppliers. David Welker, Ken Ullyot's former son-in-law, was in the hospital at the time and had the idea to buy the team. He is still not sure why.

Welker is an ebullient businessman from a construction family, based in Roanoke. He had been married to Ullyot's daughter, Donna.

Bob Chase, who had previously done public relations work for the Komets under Lister and Ullyot as well as broadcasting the games on WOWO, was hired as director of PR in August. Chase found he was busy, since Welker was thinking all the time. He told a newspaper, "If we applied just 50 percent of his ideas each day, we'd have 100 things to do. All my shoes are now loafers because I know when David calls I won't have time to lace up any shoes."

Fearing the loss of their biggest tenant, the Coliseum cut the K's rent in June 1987 and David later arranged free parking for attendees at games, in exchange for a flat fee which he would pay.

Ironically, in the midst of the financial woes, Laird was named minor hockey coach of the year by *The Hockey News*. The team had won the western division that season, losing out in the semifinals to Salt Lake City. Laird commented, "I was treated well by all the media. I pretty much talked on the hockey side for the team. I was also treated well by all the owners. Both Bob Britt and David Welker had good intentions."

Chase and Laird worked at negotiating an NHL affiliation, coming to an agreement with the Washington Capitals for the next season. Both were trying hard to keep the team on an even keel. For the players, things felt uncertain. "There were too many changes when Welker took over," said Leef, "We had worked hard together and we had

a good thing and it changed. It made it easier to say goodbye." For others, who had not experienced the team before, it felt like many other hockey teams. "I never had a problem with David," said Lucyk. "He kept hockey alive here. I was here to play the game."

Many of David's ideas had to do with marketing the team. "His odd advertising ploys were disrespectful to the game and to the other players," said Chin. "But his heart was in the right place. He tried to be too hands on."

When he took on the team, Ulliyot had recommended a coach to Welker, but the candidate turned out to be banned. At any rate, the league had decided that Laird would continue, which was good for Welker and the team.

Welker found the arrangements with various service companies to be in confusion and tried to regularize them as best he could, as he had done with the parking arrangements at the Coliseum. Despite Laird's winning seasons, attendance did not improve and the reputation of the team was dismal, largely the result of its continued financial problems and the atmosphere at the games, which was rough. "The biggest problem David had was with the Coliseum management," said Dick Zimmerman. "His first day there he offended them and that was it. Chase did the talking later, but it got pretty brutal."

Bill Welker put his finger on the central issue when he said, "My father is a good spirited guy." Although he has been blamed for what happened, David Welker was simply one of a series of owners who had been unable to make the Komets pay, and his heart was always in the right place. In 1990, the matter came to a head. "I could not afford another season," says Welker, so he began to search for a solution. Lucyk said, "There was uncertainty, but we didn't think the team would fold."

Beginning in May, Welker was in negotiations with the Franke family to buy the team. They were surprised by his late-June announcement that he was moving the team to Albany, New York.

He had made an arrangement with a grocery chain to sponsor the team, which would be called the Albany Choppers. He also had a new arena available. For the first time in almost forty years, Fort Wayne would be faced with a winter season without hockey, and the end of the Komets name. Welker was going to take most of the team with him, and Al Sims, the coach, remained under contract to him.

The Franke family had a longtime interest in the team. Stephen Franke explained: "When we were kids, we could skate outdoors. We

had friends who had a rink in the back yard, we'd play for two or three months out there. If there was no ice, we'd play ball hockey in the driveway. The streets would get icy and stay that way, so we could play out there with boots and pucks. The ruts in the ice made it hard to skate.

"We had a pro team here. There were only six teams in the NHL, but the Komets were a big draw. At the time, the seventh or eighth largest draw in hockey. It was a big deal and for us, hockey was an important sport. We liked to play—our oldest brother played college hockey.

"Up the street from us, there was a couple who went to Florida for the winter. They rented their house to hockey players—Thornson, Ronson, Fergie. We knew them. They were our idols."

They had already expressed a concern in the mid-eighties at a time when Lister was looking for investors. They knew the daily business operations of the team as David Franke had worked for the team and Michael Franke had been Chase's color man 1984-89. "At that time," said Steve, "We had two concerns, that the Komets were playing losing hockey and that we did not have enough money."

Since it appeared there would be no franchise in Fort Wayne, the Frankes turned to the IHL office, to see if they had any suggestions. The cost of a new franchise was prohibitive, but they wondered if there was an alternative. "You know," said Steve, "Like buying a new car or a used car." As it happened, the New York Rangers were pulling out of Flint and the Flint owners' group felt they needed an NHL affiliate to survive. With the help of the IHL brass, they bought the newly-defunct franchise. They announced the new team on 16 July 1990 and went to David Welker to ask for the use of the Komets name. He generously agreed, with a few conditions, which they accepted. The Komets had been saved. "We're proud we did it, for hockey and for the community," said Steve.

Welker's Albany team was short-lived. "The league didn't try to sabotage the Albany team," observed Lucyk, "But they didn't help him." Underfunded, and with two other nearby hockey teams as competition, the Choppers folded at Christmas.

Stephen Franke held the financial stake behind the family's Komet enterprise. "He was the visionary, always looking ahead," said their friend Bohn Popp. He went on to describe Michael as 'a real sales person, who recognizes the need to market the team and understands the importance of the name. He's a great ambassador for the Komets and can interact with anyone, it's a natural talent.' David, the team's General

Manager, is 'a competitor, a fighter who wants to win. He has an inner fire and wants everybody around him to succeed.'

In August 1990, the Frankes said they didn't have a single player, but they swiftly put together a team. They knew they couldn't waste time. "If we missed a year, then the Komets would be dead," they said, "We had to play that season." They placed an emphasis on 'old-time Komets hockey.' Michael said, "I heard some fans talking about if the Komets would survive. They shouldn't have to worry about that nor whether the owner and coach were fighting. I was determined not to have an adversarial relationship with the coach, the media or the Coliseum." The lease at the Coliseum was one of their largest expenses.

Asked about the vision, Steve Franke said, "We were considered the model franchise. We had a good product, even if we weren't necessarily winning, and the fans were coming. They got entertained." Although Fort Wayne was a small city compared with other IHL towns (such as Salt Lake City), the K's could compete with those major markets if they had a good product. "For the first five years, we did compete. As new markets came in, there were bigger franchise fees, we began to lose money." The next five years were not so great, but the move to the UHL has improved things.

How did they manage to keep things going in the early days?

David Franke explained that they proposed a special lease with the Coliseum as part of their re-launch of the Komets. Previously, the team had paid a rental fee per night, no matter how many tickets were sold. The team's other revenue came from advertising and sales at the souvenir booths. The Coliseum retained profits on the concession stands and from parking.

The Franke proposal suggested that if there were more than 5000 turns of the stile on any night, they paid nothing. The Coliseum's earnings from the concessions and parking would pay their way. The arena agreed and the Franke organization paid \$4000 in rent the first year. In the previous season, Welker had paid \$125000.

Other teams in the IHL with cash-flow problems followed this example and were able to rewrite their arena leases in the same way.

The Frankes also tried other innovative ideas. Carey said, "Other teams with NHL connections lost control of their own teams, so the Frankes kept control of their own" by declining affiliation. Remembering the distinguished history of the team, and its links to the city, they gave

the former players season tickets or a pass. "This was really classy," remarked Gus Braumberger.

"I'll never forget when the Frankes bought the team," said Doug Johnston, "It was big news, the front page of the sports section in the paper. This was the Komets, this was important. They did a great job of marketing it. They were also accessible to fans. At the first home game the Frankes stood at the escalators in tuxedos and shook everyone's hands." That gesture represents their continuing attitude to the public, the Komets fans. After ten years, Bill Welker aptly commented, "Hats off to the Frankes! They had great ideas, and made them work by playing old time hockey. I was thrilled." The continuing huge crowds at the Komets games show that plenty of other people are, too.

Colin Chin made a remark which reflects how many players feel about the various 80s owners of the K's—Lister, Welker, the Frankes, even Britt—"Each owner played their own part in keeping Komet hockey in Fort Wayne."

Moments of the Eighties

1980-81 was Moose Lallo's last season as coach of the Komets. They ended the year with a 37-30-15 record, and lost in the semifinals to Saginaw. The top scorers on the team were Scully, McDougall and George Kotsopoulos, a new face on the team from Saginaw.

The season saw another interesting addition to the team: Jeff Carlson, of the *Slapshot* movie. He had been playing in Muskegon, with roommate Brant Kiessig.

"Ted Garvin had taken over as coach of the Mohawks," says Brant, "And he didn't like rookies. I sat out two games, then I went to see if I could get traded. I wanted some ice time." Unexpectedly one day he was told to report to Toledo, where he would meet his new team, the Komets. He was on loan. Carlson was sent with him. They went to Toledo and played that night. "I had been traded in junior and it was a downer, so I wondered how this would go, but Rory Cava was here. I knew him from midget, and we blended right in."

The game held some surprises. "The Toledo fans got uppity with us. They started tossing chairs at the players' bench. Something was going on out on the ice. Jeff started it. You could see these guys watching Jeff, just waiting for the green light to let go. Then it started. Poor Steve Janaszak, the spare goalie, he was trapped on the bench and

got pummelled. I scored two goals and thought I'd done well for my first game, but all they talked about was Jeff Carlson."

Carlson's role in *Slapshot* was perhaps a reflection of his actual hockey self. "We had a party and played the movie," said Kiessig. "It was hilarious to hear his voice. He was very much like his character in the film, tall but not imposing. He had a mean streak the size of the Grand Canyon on the ice. He only had to flash that and everyone else knew. His reputation preceded him. He would fight and give you a stick over the noodle too." Kotsy remembers a game in Flint when Jeff and Byron Shutt 'had a stick swinger at center ice, a real sword fight.'

Kiessig, Dale Baldwin and Gary DeLonge were young rookies that year, and they enjoyed themselves. "The guys were a good blend of vets and rookies," he says. "Vets like Irons and Penasse were well along in their careers. It was an education for me, a wide-eyed kid. I kept thinking, 'I can't believe I'm being paid to play hockey!' Robbie was the patriarch, you could see he'd do the right thing by us. Those guys, they'd take care of us. They'd show tolerance if we messed up. We quickly learned that the bottom line is that it's a business."

Brant was put on a line with Terry McDougall, but no third person seemed to work out, although they tried several, including Carlson. "Terry was small and smart. I kept thinking, 'How does he do it?' He was cagey with the puck, with no physical confrontations."

Rory Cava had come from Dallas, a farm team of Vancouver. He had already heard about Fort Wayne. "I'm from Thunder Bay [Ontario], and I remember watching Willie Tognitz and Bill Goldthorpe when I was younger. I knew they'd played in Fort Wayne.⁷ And of course, Con Madigan."

At 6 foot 5 and 225 pounds, Rory's role was thrust on him. "I didn't have much choice. It was the days of brawls. The fights would be premeditated, even the coaches would do it." But he says that most teams had several tough guys, not a single policeman, and the teams all stuck together. He was not the first-line fighter on the team anyway, he says, that was Mark Toffolo. (Toffolo was only with the K's for 15 games that season, but Penasse, Glen Tomalty and Kelly Elcombe all had more penalty minutes than Rory.) Cava described Elcombe as 'tough, tough as nails.'

⁷ As opposing players, not Komets.

Rory's first game was against Toledo. "People noticed me because of my height," he said, "And I had a fight." He fought Paul Tantardini, one of the league's most feared players, although he did not know it at the time. "I did well and I was respected after that." Neal Colvin remembers, "Rory Cava gave Paul Tantardini the worst beating I ever saw him get. After that game, Paul seemed much more docile playing against Fort Wayne." This game also saw the Toledo debut of Dirk Graham, who had been placed on waivers by the K's after six games. The Goaldiggers had picked him up only the day before and he spent three profitable seasons with them.

Kiessig describes Cava as having the 'biggest hands I've ever seen on any human being I've ever met, but he was a slow skater. He could use his reach but it was tougher for him when turning.' Rory describes himself as 'a character player who would stick up for the rest of the guys. I wanted two things, to be a character player and to develop my game.' He found his year here valuable, because he had more ice time this season than in three years in junior. "Moose was a good teacher for developing players," he says. He returned to Dallas.

A highlight of the 1980-81 season was Rod Willard's scoring five goals in the game of 21 February 1981. Willard was spending a rookie season with the K's, when he scored 32 goals, and went on to play mostly in the AHL. He played one game in the NHL in 1982-83 and returned for a few games in Fort Wayne during the 1984-85 season. Mike Penasse observed, "He was a big, strong kid. The puck seemed to follow him like superglue. Everything seemed to click for him that year."

After finishing second in the IHL's western division, far behind the first place K-Wings, the K's faced Milwaukee in the first round of the playoffs. The K's won in seven games, with Kotsopoulos and Kiessig scoring so well they were called The Special K Boys. Brant says he had goalie Rich Sirois' number, 'his weakness played to my strength. I shot to a certain spot that was his Achilles' heel.' He scored an overtime winner. "The overtime had just started and everyone was a little tentative. I got a pass from Rory hooked in on the wing. As I was going round the defenseman, sometimes I'd get jammed up but this time there was no defenseman and I got a clean shot and scored."

The semifinal series was against Saginaw, a team the K's had done well against that season. "We were a little worried going into that series," says Brant, "You could feel it in the dressing room." Houston's CHL team had folded and sent many of their players to Saginaw. The

K's lost 4 games to 1. "We lost a heartbreaker overtime game and it took the wind out of our sails," Brant remembered. "The public didn't know about Houston and blamed Moose for it."

A fan's observations about the year are a little different. "The K's had a team that actually led the league into early February and then completely fell apart. I think they ended the season with a nine game winless streak. Saginaw did get some good players when Houston folded. In fact, the Komets were the only team to win a game against Saginaw in the three rounds of the playoffs that year."

Moose's departure left an opening for Ron Ulliyot to return to the K's, this time as coach, in the fall of 1981. It was a losing first season, but the three that followed were winners, including a record of 52-22-8 in 1983-84, when they won the league championship. All four seasons saw the K's out of the playoffs in the semifinals.

On 17 October 1981, Steve Stockman in his second game as a Komet scored two goals. He described it: "I got the puck at the other side of the net, I went behind the net to the other side. I think [goalie Rich Sirois] was surprised that I had gotten the puck." Kim Study wrote in the *Journal Gazette*, "Stockman moved up and swooped the puck around the post into the net before a surprised Sirois could move." Stockman departed for Flint after 35 games with the K's and later played in Austria.

Terry McDougall was in his seventh season in Fort Wayne but was traded to Flint for four players. "Ted Garvin phoned me and wanted him," Ron Ulliyot explained, "He'd lost 9-1 and said he would take a chance on a trade. He offered four players, Mike Clarke, Bruno Baseotto, John Gibb and Brian Keates. We needed what was offered, but it was very hard for the fans. The new players helped us in the playoffs and built our team the next year." Only Clarke completed 1982-83 with the K's; Laird's comment was, "He played his best years in Flint." Baseotto did not return that year at all and both Keates and Gibb were traded partway through the season. It was also suggested that McDougall was at the end of his career, but in fact he had a fine 1982-83 season in Flint, with 77 points.

1981-82 was a season with a great deal of player traffic. As Kotsy diplomatically put it, "There were lots of personnel problems in my second year." Bud's son, Chuck Gallmeier, rode with the team all year with the intention of writing a book about minor pro hockey. "We wondered, was he writing *Slapshot 2*?" commented Martin Burgers. In the end, the book was not published. Burgers also observed, "We had

three small guys at center that year, McDougall, Ron Leef and Kotsy. McDougall was replaced by Brian Keates, who was puny but could skate like the wind.” Goalie Jim Park was the elder statesman, the experienced vet of the team. At thirty, he was in the last year of a ten-year career that had seen him play in eight leagues.

Bill Welker remembers a brawl with Toledo this year. “Bob Phillips went nuts and started a goal line fight. Ted Garvin [the Toledo coach] threw a stick at Bob like a spear and Bob went at him. Everybody fought. But everybody fought in those days, now they stand around and hold hands.”

Dan Sanscartier was brought up from the QMJHL at the end of 1981-82 for a few games and the playoffs. He shared the net duties the following year with Darrell May and in 1983-84 with Darren Jensen. He was very quick, ‘acrobatic’ according to Laird and capable of ‘spectacular saves.’ He was also small, “very little but with big hair,” said Leef, “His size was against him.” In 1983-84, he played a few games with Hershey and was goalie of the week there.

“Dan lost his glove in a brawl in Kalamazoo,” said Joe Franke, “He went into their box and a trainer took it. I had to redo an old glove in two days so he could play. It was one of the problems I faced. Dan was very quiet, all skin and bones.”

In the game of 31 December 1982 the K’s defeated the Peoria Prancers 12-2. They scored nine goals in one period, four in a span of 1 minute 15 seconds. Seven of the goals came after a power failure. Thirteen Komets figured in the scoring, as 22 assists helped the 12 goals, and even goalie Dan Sanscartier got an assist. Leef had a hat trick. Brian Keates two goals, Hilworth one, and two assists. The K’s outshot the Prancers 57-28. Leef commented, “Maybe they should turn the lights off every game!” and Dan said it was nice to have a ten-goal cushion.

The success of the team in 1983-84 was helped by the goaltending of rookie Darren Jensen, Dan, and Dave Ross, who played seven games. Coming from the University of North Dakota, Jensen was the #1 goalie, and won IHL rookie of the year and the Gatschene trophy for MVP. He and Dan shared the Norris goaltending trophy. Despite his success, his memory is only lukewarm. “He tanked on us in the playoffs after signing with an NHL team [Philadelphia Flyers],” said Leef. “After such a great season, it left a bad feeling.” Hilworth commented, “He was good or we were helping him out, I don’t know.”

1981-82 saw the debut of Rob Motz after five seasons in the OHA. He played only a few games that season, but then had two full years with the K's before his sudden retirement. He is admired by everyone who played with him.

He played a couple of games with the Maine Mariners (AHL) in 1982-83 and his return was celebrated by Kim Study in her *Journal Gazette* column of 5 January 1983. She describes his 1981-82 stint as 'short but impressive,' probably because he'd scored a hat trick in his first game and scored ten goals in 12 games. After being cut during the Philadelphia Flyers training camp, he returned to the K's. He said, "I think I would like to be an assist man rather than a goal scorer. I get just as much pleasure out of setting up a goal as scoring one." As we saw, Ron Leef considered himself the setup man and Motz the scorer, but both remarks probably reflect any good player's attitude, which is that it doesn't matter who scores, as long as the puck gets in the net. Study commented, "Motz is probably best remembered so far this season for converting on a penalty shot in a November 11 game against Muskegon and then scoring the winning goal in overtime in a comeback victory Christmas Night against Kalamazoo. Both times, of course the puck beat the goaltender at the top corner."

Doug Rigler, who roomed with Motz, confirmed that he liked high shots 'to scare the goalie.' He had a carefree attitude, on and off the ice. He had a hard shot too. "He could blast that sucker," said Hilworth, "And it always went where he wanted it to go."

On 19 January 1984, Motz scored an overtime goal against Milwaukee for a Komets 4-3 win. "He was a good hockey player and a nice guy," said Colin Lister, "You don't always find that combination."

Motz described a necessary ingredient for winning to Kim Study: "Attitude. If you've got a lot of guys that get along well and like each other, no matter what happens on the ice, somebody's going to be there to help you out. We didn't have that feeling last year and you could tell it on the ice." He felt the 1982-83 season reflected a better attitude.

In his three seasons with the Komets, George Kotsopoulos was always in the top six scorers on the team, with especially high numbers for assists. "He was not the best skater, but he was a playmaker," said Leef, "And he gave his shirt to take care of his friends. On the other hand, he wouldn't come off the ice. You wouldn't want to be the shift after him or you'd miss a shift." Kotsy says he was good at passing, but not a fighter, 'only if I had to.' Norris said he was 'an analytical guy who

reads the play.' Fan Gary Gardner called him, "Fun to watch, with a big effort. You always thought there would be a check, a push, the chance of a goal." Kotsy says his most memorable goal was the one he fired into an empty net, part of a Turner Cup winning 4-1 game over Toledo when he was with the Flint Generals.

He didn't subscribe to the usual three-man-line theory of one to set up, one to score and a tough guy. "It depends," he says, "On a checking line, there'd be two tough guys. On our line [Scully/DeLonge/Kotsy], I was the setup man, Gary was the checker. The second year it wasn't a good team and the line changed. I had Scully but the other guy was different, sometimes it was Keates. In my third year I was with Wally Schreiber, still a young guy who was learning, and Mike Clarke, who was older and experienced."

When Ron Ulliyot came from Fort Worth, he brought some Texas players with him, including Wayne Bishop, named as the greatest prankster on the team, and Rob Attwell. John Hilworth said of Ron's tactics, "He was good at picking and juggling the lines. He'd get the guys together and figured we'd go out and play the game."

He didn't always see eye-to-eye with Ron. "The second year I was here, he could see things I couldn't see. The coach can point it out to you or you try something and it's not what he wanted. Ron and I were watching a game video and I was behind the net. Ron told me off and I got mad. He said, 'Do what I say or walk out.' Well, I liked playing so I thought, to hell with the coach, I like the other guys. I sat out a few games, he was that mad. I didn't know why. I got tired and said, 'Play me or trade me,' and I dressed the next game."

Hilworth referred to his line as the Hold Your Own line. He was on it with Steve Salvucci and Dale Baldwin. "We would get people worked up, the team and fans. Dale would charge after somebody. We'd even start a game that way to get the guys going. We had 600 pounds of forward, all we had to do was run at people." Hilworth was voted MVP for 1982-83, and holds the K's record for most PIM in one game, 29 minutes. He is modest about the MVP award, "I saved their ass a few times. They didn't worry when I was there. My job as a tall big defenseman was to prevent scoring." He says that when he was young, he was taller than the other players, but this is also true of his older playing days (he is 6 foot 4).

An exciting event of the 1982-83 season was the visit of the San Diego Chicken. He came on 13 November, provoking big ticket sales,

drawing a sellout crowd. He returned on 27 February, drawing 8000 people to an interesting game when the K's went from 0-3 to 7-3, with Motz scoring the winning goal. The Chicken came back on 6 April to a surprise, when Morganna, a stripper known as the Kissing Bandit, ran on the ice and kissed him. No one seems to know if it was planned by anyone other than Morganna.

Early in 1983-84, Ulliyot traded Scully, who skittered around the league until he landed in Toledo the following year. "Somebody sprayed my Bronco with 'Trade Ulliyot not Scully,'" Ron said.

"We had a team that could win," he says of the 1983-84 players, "And at Christmas we were close to first place. We were having trouble, they didn't even like me. So we had a meeting at McMillen Park, I told them I was sorry and said, 'Let's have fun.' We won the league. This was my greatest team, the one I loved the most. Disaster came at the end of the season, we lost Leef, Schreiber and Rigler in two weeks through injuries, we lost the impetus and were out of the finals." It was a terrible end to a good year, but Rigler observed that there had still been few fans in the stands.

Kotsy remembers, "The Komets were the best team in the league that year. The last game against Toledo was played in a 'fog bowl.' Toledo beat them 1-0, but it was a good game. Then Toledo went on to the playoffs and Flint won the cup."

Ron Leef said of Steve Salvucci, "He was a great teammate. People loved him because he worked hard, there's no substitute for that. He was an entertainer on and off the ice. He could hit four or five guys in one shift and people would cheer him. There's a player like him now on the Komets, Kelly Miller, fast and skating with reckless abandon. But now no one cheers him."

Steve was one of the fan favorites and is still 'an all time Komet' according to David Franke. "He never cheated you with his effort," says Laird. "A robust physical player with big hits." "He could hit you a hundred times and not hurt you," said Leef. "He was unpredictable," says Chase. "He could skate like a demon and throw punches fast and hard. Good with people." His tough brother Mark played here too. Steve left after a contract dispute and was missed on his line, by Chin and Baldwin.

In 1985, Bob Britt conceived an advertising tool, a 1986 calendar featuring Komets players. "It was perfect timing," says Leef. "The players were doubtful," says Rigler. "But we had to do it. They chose who was going to be in it and how we were to be dressed. I had the

leathers without the bike. The players didn't take it seriously in the end. It was a success, but some of the guys took lots of ribbing, especially Salvucci and Baldwin, because they were built." Terry Marquart designed the pictures. "It was mild compared to other stuff," said Leef.

The eighties were a time when the affiliations between minor pro teams and the NHL became stronger. Moe Bartoli commented, "As soon as the NHL started taking over the teams, the IHL became unstable. There were teams folding and changing before that, but in the longterm we lost more. We had to operate with these extra players. Players would be coming and going. Now the NHL has to subsidize minor hockey. The NHL did it to them. The players don't care where the franchises are and they have no sense of place."

1985-86 featured an exciting game on 10 January when Wally Schreiber scored twice against Muskegon. The final score was 6-5 after an overtime shootout. The goalies that year were Rich St Croix and Pokey Reddick: 'what a great team!' said Laird.

"We had a great regular season," said Rigler. They won the Huber trophy as league champs, then defeated the Salt Lake Golden Eagles 4 games to 1 in the first round of playoffs. The Peoria Rivermen went down 4 games to 2 in round two, but the K's lost to the Muskegon Lumberjacks in four straight in the finals. "There were a lot of injuries in the Muskegon tournament," Rigler continued, "We had no extra players. I had a groin injury, Baldwin a broken nose. We had no depth. Plus we had some players who were ready to go home, they didn't care. It was only a few days but some had already given up their apartments and were ready to go, so they didn't give it everything they had. It was a bitter pill for us who were so close to the cup. It would have been close if everyone had given all they could. See, there wasn't much money in the playoffs for the players, we got a share of the pool, not pay."

Hilworth returned for a few games in 1986-87. He met Rob Laird at the Hobby House, and Rob asked him to play. John was surprised so he accepted, playing against Salt Lake City, a tough team. The Eagles had done damage to the K's and Laird wanted John to teach them a lesson. "I practiced all week. Laird was suspended up in the press box. I was sent out and Salvucci was glad to see me." Hilworth was in front of the net, slipped the puck into the left corner and scored. The fans went nuts. "It was my first game, first shift, first shot," he says. "Then I got into a fight and then got an assist." By juggling his work schedules, he was able to play the next seven games, a fine coda to his career.

In 1987-88, Laird changed to a more defensive style of play. He reflects on what it means to be a coach now: "Team building means spirit building. It's important for the guys to do things together. Socializing is important. You are in it together, not separately. The coach has to facilitate the progress in this area too."

Welker did not feel that Laird was the coach he wanted. "His style was puck it and chase it. That's so we could compete but it wasn't good hockey even though he won coach of the year. We had lost some good players, big guys, so we needed some more." The players he is referring to were Baldwin, Salvucci, Hilworth and Shoebottom. Welker retained the general manager's task of finding players, but he says, "Robbie did all the player work mainly with Washington." The team also had a good relationship with Winnipeg and a trial link with Denver.

In 1987-88, a number of players from the Washington Capitals arrived for a year in Fort Wayne: Steve Hollett, Bill Houlder, Rob Murray, Claude Dumas, Alain Raymond, Robin Bawa, Chris Felix, David Jensen ("Boy, could he smoke!") and Martin Burgers. The following year, if they didn't make the Capitals, they were sent to Baltimore; the Capitals had ended their association with Fort Wayne at the end of 1987-88. Lucyk remarked that having an assortment of players sent down from the NHL did not make for the best team. "The team was not well rounded. You need toughness, a goalie, a scorer, penalty killers. We were missing some of those, especially the fighters until Fletch, Butters and Kaminski came. We needed a balance." It's a good example of how having the NHL team in charge, with its own needs coming first, tied the hands of the IHL owners. Carey ended up playing only two playoff games, crowded out by the Washington players. When he came back the next season, he says, "I was surprised when he asked me back."

Bawa finished his first stint here with a little excitement. On 30 March 1988 the K's were playing Kalamazoo at the Coliseum. Bawa was fighting a pair of badboys, Kevin Evans and Al Tuer, taking them each on twice in a single shift. Neal Colvin reports, "It sounds like Robin was suckered from behind, but that could be hometown reporting." A brawl resulted, which ended with Robin taking home two fighting majors, two match penalties (for intent to injure) and a game misconduct. He was suspended for the duration of the season, which amounted to only 7-8 games, and was reinstated for the playoffs.

Speaking of the fights, Robin now says, "I was practicing to be in shape for the playoffs." The following day's paper showed Al and

Robin fighting. Robin remembers being at the bottom of a pile, defenseless, and Evans shouting, "Punch him! Punch him!" He believes he then hit Evans over the head with a helmet. It sounds like a classic.

David Welker says he hired Al Sims as assistant coach (and player) on Washington's advice. Bill Welker's memory is that Archie Henderson wanted the job and David Welker liked the idea, since Archie was colorful. Bill thought Archie was 'too crazy' and brought Al's name forward, because he wanted to work with him. "Dad told me I got Al the job," says Bill. Laird remembers that he had a call from Al, or a resume, and discussed him with Chase. They were impressed. Al was coaching in Britain, wanting to move into coaching in the US, so they offered him a player-coach job. "He was a good player, a smooth skater and good puck mover," says Rob, "And a smart offensive defenseman, a very smart defenseman who could play both ends. He did not play all games and helped with practices."

"Al was my defense partner for half a year," says Burgers, "It was a big experience. I didn't know about his background, he's a modest guy and never mentioned it. He was skating slow, well he was 37 or so, that's all I knew." Al came to the Komets at 35, after fifteen years in the NHL/AHL and Europe. After Al's year as assistant, Laird's departure left the coaching job open and Al stepped up. It was a rocky year.

In 1989-90 the team had an affiliation with Chicago and Welker says he began thinking of moving the team. The first candidate was Kansas City. He also brought in Dennis Desrosiers as General Manager.

Dennis knew the IHL inside out after ten years as a player on the Saginaw Gears and one of the K's best-known opponents. "He wasn't given much to do," said Dick Zimmerman, "He and Al were friends. Also he had NHL connections and Welker was interested in that but Dennis couldn't convince him to go for it." "Dennis and I talked all the time," says Welker, "He was more of a coach than a general manager."

Lucyk remembers, "Dave wanted to create trouble for Al, and he used Dennis to start a mutiny. It was his way or no way. So Dennis helped with the coaching, he had lots of experience and Al didn't. He had new ideas and they were bad. He was a maniac, tough and hard nosed. He enjoyed mixing it up."

It came to a head during a game when Sims put Bob Fowler in the power play. "He couldn't play the point," says Welker, "I sent Desrosiers down to coach. I told them I didn't want to see him up in my office. Al would argue with me about players. He almost got fired that

day. I needed a better hockey man.” The resulting breach was symbolic of all that was wrong with the K’s that year.

Among Welker’s more discussed ideas was that the team wear white skates. He insists he wanted black only and does not know where the rumor started. The team also had pucks made from recycled rubber, which did not bounce properly, but David says, “We never used them in games, only practices.”

The K’s seemed to find winning elusive in those years. Bill Welker’s view from the trainer’s corner was, “You need guys who think alike. You don’t need talent as much as you need the will. In the late 80s we had the talent, but they didn’t have the focus on winning.”

The Komets finished at the bottom of their division that year, and the stage was set for the tumult of the summer, which saw Welker take his team to Albany, the Franks revive the Komet name with the Flint franchise, and a new era begin for the fifth decade of the team.

Rob Laird

The first word people mention when asked about Robbie Laird is ‘intense.’ The second is ‘tough.’ Colin Chin said, “He works so hard at knowing the game. Watching him play, how tough he was, I’m glad I never had to play against him.” “He’s the toughest,” said Irons, “When he first came here, he had a broken hand. He was only 160 pounds. During the first practice, he nailed some big guy.” “He had no fear of getting hit,” said Eddie Long, “He’d never back down.”

After a noticeable junior career with the Regina Pats, Laird arrived here fourteen games into the 1974-75 season, aged nineteen. “The Komets were doing badly, and Ralph Keller arrived too,” he says. He established his place on the team right away. “He was aggressive and went out and did his job,” said Ron Ullyot, who served on a line with him at one time, “He was a good skater and worked hard, but was very quiet.” A fan observed, “He was always falling down because he was putting every ounce of effort into it.” Trainer Terry Reincke said, “He was very serious. We saw the intensity in the locker room and left him alone.” The distance between him and the other players did not leave him isolated, however. “He had the most heart,” said Norris, “If there was one water bottle in the desert and I had to go in with someone, I’d go with him.”

His heart was one part of his anatomy that was mentioned often. “He wasn’t the prettiest skater, he had a choppy style,” said Sid Veysey,

"But he'd never back down. He had heart." "He didn't have one exceptional skill that stands out," said Dumba, "Except his heart's as big as a bathtub." Other parts were noticed too:

"He had a cast on his hand and his foot on Monday, and on Wednesday he took them off and played." (Al Dumba)

"He scored where big guys couldn't score, from knees or belly. He'd scratch and claw to the rebound." (Rob Tudor)

"It was like Komet was tattooed on his butt." (Terry Ewasiuk)

"We were out of the playoffs, so Rob and Janis and I went to see it. Rob said, 'I'd give my [unmentionable organ] to be in this series.'" (Gregg Pilling)

It boiled down to this, as summarized by Pilling: "He was quiet and he led by example. He played by burning both ends of the candle. He was a real team guy. And there wasn't a girl who wasn't after him, and you can quote me."

"I was always sorry for the right wingers who had to play against him and Dave all night. That couldn't have been much fun," said Dan Bonar, "He was a headsy hockey player." He continued to impress with his physicality, playing through 1977-78 with a broken foot. "He'd go through a brick wall for you," said Penasse.

In 1978-79 he set a new K's record for penalty minutes at 296. That year, he was part of the Western Union, the all-star line with Dumba and McDougall. After five seasons, he left Fort Wayne and spent two seasons in Oklahoma City, including a game in the NHL with Minnesota. He then played for a short season in Nashville (CHL), cut short by an injury. He took the next season (1982-83) off.

"Minnesota was interested in me," he says, "They saw I'd kept my enthusiasm for the game. I was in an unusual situation. I left here and played in Oklahoma, but there wasn't as big a difference as I thought playing in the CHL. The skill level is a little higher, but there's lots more money, the travel and style are different. The IHL is more physical." During his year off, he worked at AALCO "It was important for me," he says, "It proved to me I could earn a living outside hockey. I felt better and decided to come back. I trained very hard."

The result was an impressive two seasons teamed with Doug Rigler and Wally Schreiber. "It was interesting," says Rigler, "The left wing (Robbie) very intense and the right wing (Wally) very laid back and joking. Robbie was mad because we weren't serious enough, but Wally

would say, "Don't worry, we aren't up for two more shifts." All three were among the top scorers on the team.

During the upheavals of the mid-eighties, Laird came to the fore. He was interested in coaching and indicated his interest to Colin Lister. Ron Ullyot was leaving the team and Colin was selling out to Bob Britt. "My last job as owner was to hire a coach," says Lister, "Ken didn't think Robbie would do, he had no experience, but I saw his potential and thought we should take a chance. My intuition was right. He was very dedicated."

After he took over the coach's job, Laird played two last games with the K's. "We were playing in Toledo and were down to twelve guys. We were really short, so I decided to play. Chris McSorley was after Jim Burton, our star player, so I got McSorley in a fight and we were both kicked out of the game." McSorley had 545 PIM that season. Laird dressed for the next game also, and on the Monday was claimed on waivers by Milwaukee. That prevented him from dressing for the K's again, and his playing career ended. Milwaukee coach Phil Wittliffe thought he was playing a good joke, but it backfired on Laird.

"It's a tough transition from player to coach," said Leef, "Dealing with players when you have to go from peer to boss. Also the style changed. Ron was a defensive coach and Rob was more an offensive guy."

His expectations, familiar from his playing days, continued. "He was intense as a coach," said Carey Lucyk, "He might not see eye to eye with the players, but he was what you wanted in a coach." "He was tough personally," said Chin, "And maybe not so good one on one."

"The transition from player to posthockey is a book in itself," said Rob, "I had taken something from each of the coaches I'd had. I didn't find it so tough, because I didn't separate myself from the players. I even drank with them. I knew what they could do. And I was lucky to have Dale to provide strong leadership and skilled guys like Rigler, Leef and Schreiber. Coaches are only as good as the players and I inherited good ones."

"I was motivated to survive," he continues, "Motivated by fear of failure. I didn't have a great ability but I had enthusiasm and I knew hard work was necessary." "Rob is one of the hardest working people around," agreed Lucyk.

"The toughest part of the job," said Laird, "Was contract negotiations with the players. We had the agreements with NHL teams,

They would send a player here or there. We got good goalies that way—Pokey, Bob Essensa. That first year of coaching, I couldn't wait to get to the rink in the morning."

He was in a good position from the first. "He was a respected leader," said Rob Tudor of Laird as a player, and this continued. "The transition was not difficult for him," said Rigler, "Because of his personality. Everybody knew and respected him anyway. We knew where he stood. Also, he wasn't intertwined with every player's life. I remember on our first road trip, Wally and I were late for morning skate and he fined us each \$50. That set the tone. People thought, if he'd do it to his old linemates, he'd do it to anyone. As a coach he was knowledgeable and still very intense, and a better communicator than we expected. And disciplined. You always knew what he expected. I didn't realize he understood the game so well. As a player you don't know this about someone."

"The guys liked playing for him," said Hilworth simply, and Lucyk observed that Laird later taught Al Sims a lot when he came to be assistant coach. "I learned on the job," says Rob, "I went to a coaching clinic, watched videos, read manuals. We had a good season because we had a good group of guys."

"He was the most intense person I've ever had coach me," said Burgers. "He tried to play the right players in the right positions. He was in charge and everyone knew it. The practices were good ones and not boring. Sometimes the relationship with him made us angry, but later we realized how good he was. We learned a lot and it's not often that way." Todd Strueby observed, "He had his game plan, winning above all else. We didn't talk much, I didn't feel I knew him." "Under Robbie," said Dick Zimmerman, "They played as much at the end of the games as at the beginning. This was how he did it, he got everybody stirred up."

Bill Welker worked as Rob's equipment manager and trainer. "I like serious coaches," he says, "You know where you stand. I like what I do and I want to win. Hanging around with players, feeling good about that, that's been over for a long time for me. I'm shooting for a championship ring. Robbie was a competitor. He doesn't like losing. He treated me fairly and understood he had to teach me. Being there with him, that's how I learned so much. He helped me get on top of my job."

Some of Rob's ideas are unconventional. He says he doesn't think players reach their potential until they're 27-30, while others think 22-23 is the norm.

During the turmoil surrounding the change of Komets ownership in 1986, Laird was signed as K's coach by the IHL commissioner, who simply handed the done deal to the new owner, David Welker.

Rob had four winning seasons as coach, the last two with almost identical records. He left in 1989 to continue coaching and scouting. He is now a scout for the LA Kings. "I have been ultrafortunate to stay in hockey all my life," he says.

Here are two stories which illustrate Rob's clear, straightforward and unmistakable style, both told by Bob Chase:

We were in Toledo and the players were walking out of the dressing room to get on the bus. They had to run the gauntlet of Toledo fans, jeering and even throwing things. One big guy was wearing a World War I German army helmet, the kind with the spike on top. As Laird went by him, he reached out and clipped him. Robbie had his bag on his shoulder, but didn't break stride, he just turned and whacked the guy. He went down with blood gushing. Robbie kept right on walking and no one else tried to touch him.

Asked how someone as intense as Laird dealt with the unexpected qualities in David Welker, Chase said, "The team had done badly in a game. The next morning David came up to me and asked who the team bought its uniforms from. He wanted an order sent out right away, for pink jerseys. The next time the team played so badly, he said, he'd make them wear the pink jerseys in the third period.

"I put him off a little by suggesting they have a meeting about it that afternoon. I took Laird aside ahead of time to brief him on what was going to be said. When Welker convened the meeting, he asked me if the jerseys had been ordered. I said no, that's what this meeting is for, to discuss it. No discussion, said Welker, we're going to get them.

"Laird narrowed his eyes and said, 'If you ever come into that dressing room with a box of pink jerseys, I'll throw you out.' Welker knew he had gone too far. The matter of the pink jerseys was dropped."

Players Come and Go: The Eighties

Craig Channell was a solid but controversial defenseman who spent six seasons in Fort Wayne 1984-90. He belonged to Winnipeg and had played in Seattle (WHL) and Sherbrooke (AHL). "He felt superior and this caused a division," said Leef. "He was one of the few pros out of the Winnipeg organization who played hard," said Rigler. "He was always complaining," said Chase, "Not good in the dressing room."

Channell worked at organizing a players' union here and his steady work in this field and on the ice are underappreciated, according to Chin. "He was the first guy in the dressing room, the last to leave," said Laird, "Talking to everyone. He had time for everybody. He was a solid two-way defensive player, good at clearing the net."

In 1989-90, there were conflicts with other players, and the fans would shout, "Change the Channell," but he didn't react much. He left for Indianapolis in midseason, where he helped them win a Turner Cup. Later, when Laird was in Baltimore, Rob heard the Capitals had a scouting job open and recommended Craig, who took it. He is now a scout for the Nashville Predators. Rob says, "That's the greatest thing, if you can help somebody stay in the game."

Mike Lekun played two seasons here, 1986-88, gaining 236 and 296 PIM. "He was a sparkplug," said Todd Strueby, "Hilarious, good for the team and in the dressing room. He policed everyone and was very vocal. He'd tell Colin, 'You're not playing the way you should!'" They called him 'Coon Dog.' "He was a team player," said Burgers, "In the thick of the nasty stuff. He wore his emotions on his sleeve."

Wayne Bishop spent two seasons in Fort Worth (CHL) before Ron Ulliyot brought him to Fort Wayne, 1982-85. A tough and strong defensive defenseman, he upped his aggression quotient when he became a Komet. Aside from his pranks, which were famous among his teammates, Wayne is best remembered as the victim of Chris McSorley, a Toledo player in 1984-85 who bit off a piece of Wayne's nose. "[Chris] was a nut case," said Rigler, "The only guy I was actually scared of. There are tough guys and then there are psychos."

One of the most interesting careers of any Komet belongs to Wally Schreiber. After playing for the Regina Pats, he came to Fort Wayne as a rookie in 1982. He stayed for four seasons, including 1983-84 when he won the league scoring race. He then spent two seasons on the Canadian national team and played a few games with the Minnesota North Stars before returning briefly to the Komets in 1988-89. Since then, he has played most of his hockey in Europe, occasionally taking time off to play some more for the Canadian national team. Now forty, he considered retiring but the Hannover Scorpions (DEL) convinced him to continue playing.

Wally's size is generally given as the reason he didn't play more in the NHL. Doug Rigler quotes a Washington Capitals official as saying, "He's too small and not durable enough," which is ironic

considering his later career. He is a very fast skater. 'explosive' in Rob Tudor's words. "His work with the Canadian national team introduced him to European hockey," explained Laird, which suited him. "He could put a puck through a hole from fifty feet away," said Baldassari.

Dan Miele belonged to the Washington Capitals and spent three seasons in Hershey before being sent to the K's in 1984. He caught hepatitis before training camp, which affected his whole year. "He was a full speed player, all over the ice and with his illness, he couldn't play his normal game," said Rigler, who thinks well of Dan because he assisted on Doug's one goal with Hershey.

Tony Camazzola played in Brandon during their heyday under Dunc McCallum and was already developing his tough guy skills there. He was drafted by the Washington Capitals at 18 and spent two seasons in Hershey. He came to Fort Wayne midseason 1984-85 from Toledo. Rigler saw him at the Washington training camp in 1982: "He was a tough defenseman but they wanted him to play wing. He and Scott Stevens, the first round pick, were chopping back and forth in front of the net, so Tony fought with Scott and beat him up. Management told him off. Tony told them to tell their first round pick not to try that in front of the net with him again."

Tony was known as The Rock before the wrestler of the same name was around. 'like a page from a muscle magazine,' in Laird's words. He is chosen as the toughest in the league by many players. Chase put it best: "He made all the room he needed for himself. He had great fists, you could count on him." His popularity with his teammates is partly based on his dependability and the fact he looked out for everyone, on and off the ice. He was also a voice in the dressing room, including everyone in activities and lightening the mood if someone was down. His contribution as a team guy, on and off the ice, was unmistakable.

He had hard luck, Burgers noted, always banging up his knees and shoulders, and this limited his play. "He seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time," Martin said, "But he was tough as a tree trunk." Chase suggested that Tony's bad shoulders were caused by 'too many girls hanging from them.'

Vic Morin spent three seasons, 1981-84 going back and forth between Fort Wayne and Hershey. He was an all-round defenseman who would never back down, very quiet and serious, according to his teammates. He later played in Europe.

In 1982-83 Mark Hegarty replaced Dale Baldwin and Robert Millette, both of whom had severe knee injuries. He played ten games here and spent the rest of his career in the OHL.

During the game of 31 October 1979 at the Coliseum, Pete Crawford stopped a point shot with his jaw, breaking it in two places and missing 25 games. He returned on 6 February 1980.

Martin Burgers was born in Holland and started as a speedskater. He began playing hockey at eight, and played on a number of top level teams, often with Canadian players. This led to his emigration to Canada at 19 to try out for junior hockey. "I was the first guy signed at junior camp," he says proudly. At twenty, he was overage for the draft, but he met a Washington Capitals scout and convinced him to let Martin have a tryout. "That training camp was the best experience of my life," he says, "I played so well, I was well prepared and confident." The Capitals had nine players in Hershey, only six of whom could play, so Martin and Vic Morin were sent to Fort Wayne. "I was disappointed. It's a mistake you make as a kid." Being on his own for the first time—in junior there had always been someone to take care of him—was also difficult.

Martin is tall (6 foot 4) and he says that was a problem. "People wanted to prove themselves by fighting with me, but my response was, 'leave me alone, I just want to play hockey.' I wasn't your local bruiser, I didn't grow up that way. I might have made it to the NHL if I'd been a bruiser, but it's not part of me." Chase faulted Burgers for not being willing to hit more, but acknowledged he was a fan favorite.

During the 1982-83 training camp in Fort Wayne, a puck went over Martin's stick and an opponent took off with it. Ron Ulliyot benched him. It created a bad feeling and after game three, Martin asked to be traded. He spent the year in Peoria on a loan basis and had a good year there. In 1983-84, Ulliyot asked him back, but he had already gone. He spent a couple of enjoyable seasons playing in Holland before returning to America. He met Rob Laird at a Capitals training camp and was offered a job. He turned it down to go to the Baltimore Skipjacks, but it turned into a 0-19 year for them, and in 1988-89 Martin came back to Fort Wayne. His second stint here, two seasons, showed him being a more aggressive player. He confesses that he had butterflies before every game. "Hockey means so much that it can eat you up," he says.

Todd Strueby summed up Martin's role as 'the old guy on the team. He kept everybody balanced, and if things had to be said, he said them. If the team needed to go somewhere, his house was available.'

John Baldassari is the other candidate for 'home grown Komet,' the first being Colin Chin. John was born in Buffalo, but moved to Fort Wayne aged four and was based here since then. He was coached by Lionel Repka at 13-14, who urged him to go on in hockey, and at 15 he left for Detroit to play AAA in the Little Caesars League. He played junior in Toronto on the Markham Waxers and Marlboros.

In 1981 he was back home and Ron Ulliyot allowed him to skate with the K's and practice, and he played two games over Christmas. He played a handful of games here in 1983-84 and again in 1986-87. He had played full seasons with the Pinebridge Bucks (ACHL) in North Carolina, and the Muskegon Lumberjacks.

In 1983-84 he had tried out in Detroit and had a good training camp, but snapped an ankle early, which ruined his chances. His Pinebridge year is noted for 209 PIM and he says, "I was always fairly physical, never afraid to mix it up." After his early practices with the K's, Kotsy described him as 'a hustler.'

Chase describes Doug McGrath as 'a big good-looking French guy with little English' who liked to go disco dancing. He divided the 1984-85 season among the K's, the K-Wings and the Maine Mariners. On a road trip to Muskegon, the team had to take 96 because the other highway was snowed in. They took a rest stop at Grand Rapids and Ron Ulliyot called to tell Muskegon they were late. Sitting on the arm of Ron's chair, Doug asked, "Do you think they'll wait the game for us?"

1987-88 was Bill Houlder's rookie year. He had been drafted by the Capitals at 18 and they sent him along with several teammates to Fort Wayne. "He was still blossoming then," said Todd Strueby, "There's a fine line, guys in different situations turn out in different ways. It has to do with attitude." Bill obviously had the right one. A strong defenseman with a good hard slapshot and an imposing presence (at 6 foot 2 and 210 pounds), he went straight to the NHL after leaving here and is still there in 2002, playing for the Nashville Predators. "He was always good," said Robin Bawa, "He was maturing while he was here." "His only weakness," said Burgers, "Was the skating, but you can always improve this."

Another Regina Pats alumnus, Todd Strueby spent the early 80s playing for the Edmonton Oilers and in the mid-80s went to the Muskegon Lumberjacks for three years. In 1987-88 he came to the Komets. He joined the Canadian national team for three seasons and spent some time in Europe, a varied career. "He was smart, also tough."

said Burgers, "And a fast skater, which is why he was on the Olympic team. He was laid back, never too excited."

He made the Canadian national team by calling the coach, Dave King, for a tryout. "I worked hard and it was a great experience," Todd says, making it clear that his philosophy is to make the best of everywhere you go, work hard and have fun. "If I had a problem, it was that I had no style, I found it hard to find a niche. In junior I was a scorer, physical but in pro I didn't know any more. No matter how tough you are, there's someone tougher." And then, echoing almost all his teammates, "I just wanted to play."

Greg Tebbutt spent part of the 1981-82 season as a Komet, but is more familiar as a Komet opponent, and a tough one. He wore no shoulder pads, but at 6 foot 2 didn't need any help being imposing. John Baldassari had an encounter with him while he was here: "I was eighteen and was allowed to skate with the Komets while I was home. Ron Ullyot put on a drill. He had three guys in the circle and one puck, the drill was called Keep Away and was meant to help with stick handling, deking and controlling the puck. I was in the circle with Baldwin and Tebbutt. I took the puck from Greg and he took two steps and broke his stick over my back. I was stunned and Baldwin stepped between us, told him to stop."

In 1988-89, there was a player on the Indianapolis Ice named Ron Handy. "I used to watch for him," said Colin Chin. "He was about my size and ability. I'd check the program before the game. Then the next year, he came here." Handy had a good year with the Komets with 75 points, and went on to the Kansas City Blades when Welker moved the franchise to Albany.

"Tim Dunlop looked like he played in the 40s," said Brant Kiessig. "He had those old ankle guards and a straight stick. He played old fashioned too. He was a stay at home defenseman who wasn't big but used his body well. He could railroad guys out of the way."

Brant Kiessig started playing in Thunder Bay, where he was born and was glad to join the Brandon Wheat Kings, the top scoring team in Canadian junior hockey with their brilliant coach Dunc McCallum. He loved playing in Fort Wayne and after he'd stopped playing pro, was surprised when Moose Lallo called him to invite him to play in Baltimore. "I didn't realize how much Moose thought of me," he says. "He showed a lot of faith in Jeff [Carlson] and me, played us a lot. I knew that Moose didn't choose the players he had to work with, but I loved playing here, lots of ice time." He had had a variety of coaching, a

teaching tactician in Dunc, and ‘an in your face type’ in Pat Ginnell in Medicine Hat. He said Moose was between the two.

He describes himself as a player as ‘giving 110% regardless of the situation, whether we’re down by 10 or up by 10. I have a ferocious competitive streak.”

Jim Burton spent eight seasons with the Komets, won the Governors’ Trophy for best IHL defenseman three times (1982-83, 1985-86 and 1986-87) and even took the team scoring race in 1985-86, most unusual for a defenseman.

He was an offensive defenseman, termed ‘the Bobby Orr of the IHL’ by one teammate, a finesse player, a smooth skater and the quarter-back of the Komet power play. Eddie Long commented, “He was so skillful and smooth, I don’t think his skates ever touched the ice.” His ability to move the puck was added to that. “He’d take it and get it going to the net,” said Leef. Laird confirmed, “He’d get out of traffic and to the net.” Rob Tudor said, “He could read the ice with the puck in front, he’s skating up, he can tell what’s happening.”

A mild-mannered player, Jim was never a fighter and his lack of aggression may be one reason he stayed in the IHL. Eddie continued, “He was one inch from the NHL, but he wasn’t mean enough.”

“He got better as he got older,” said Kotsy. He remains one of the Komets top players of the 80s. Burgers said, “He was the power play point person and he could have done this at NHL level. It was probably luck. If only a coach had liked him...”

Doug Rigler

Doug Rigler feels strongly about the makeup of the line he was on when he first came to Fort Wayne. “There’s an instinctive way people communicate, we had that,” he says, and he also thinks the line shows a classic combination: one guy to set up, one guy to score and a tough guy to protect the others. “Our line was a great example, I was there to set up, Wally Schreiber to score and Laird was tough. If you have a line with three skaters, who’s going to get the puck in the corner?”

Rigler and Schreiber were new to the team that year. They had played junior together and were good friends, ‘a good mix’ as Rigler puts it. He was recovering from his concussions, but relearning the basics had made him a better player, he feels. “I was in good shape, too. I’d been boxing all summer so my conditioning was the best.” They arrived from Hershey, and saw the I as an older league. “We were unhappy,” says

Rigler, "Wally said, 'Who are these old farts?' And then Laird hardly spoke to us before Christmas." They were told that was the way he was. Robbie was very intense at games and practices, 'the kind of hard nosed tough winger that every line needs,' said Rigler, and with Schreiber's 'hands of gold' they performed well together. "Wally was the finisher. I had the garbage goals, Wally had the pretty ones," says Doug.

"Sometimes Wally would want an easy practice, but Robbie didn't go for that," said Doug, "Wally had good hands, soft hands, he knew what to do with the puck, but he didn't have a good work ethic to start with. It took him till his second year to hit his stride. In practice he could be skating full out, and he could do it other times, then he wouldn't, but the line was successful." At the Christmas party, Laird cracked Rigler's and Schreiber's heads together and said he didn't talk to new guys until halfway through the year. They all had a drink together and everything jelled. "We knew our limitations and what the others would do," says Doug, "We would practice spin passes. I knew where Wally would be on the red line and blue line of their zone, I could reach his stick and we could play off each other." Laird's memory of the season is a little different; he doesn't think he put the hammer on them and says, "Doug was a good playmaker, he could get the puck to us, a solid guy. He jokes about how much I changed. Doug and Wally helped me a lot."

Although Rigler was IHL rookie of the year in 1982-83, his big year was 1983-84, when he had 104 points. "I had good linemates, I knew this was important." He had a bad experience, which he says illustrates the problems hockey players have with unexpected moves. He and Vic Morin were called to Hershey because of injuries on the Bears, so they flew to meet the team in Binghamton. They were to play three games. They played in Binghamton and Doug scored, "I played six shifts and I thought they were pleased." Five days later a game was scheduled in Hershey, he warmed up and then was replaced by a Washington Capitals player who'd been sent down. He left for Fort Wayne. Vic stayed for the three games. "I heard later the Bears wanted me back, but the Komets management prevented it," Doug says, "It was right at the beginning of the season and was frustrating when you think you might have had the chance to try again to get up there. I had no control, the Hershey coach had no control. The decision was made by Jack Button in an office in Washington. They called me to a meeting and the Hershey people were very quiet, so I knew I was done."

After a groin injury early in 1986, Doug was told to sit out a season, but he didn't, resulting in more damage. He was injured a second time soon after the new season started and had to retire in the fall of 1986. He had four admirable seasons with the K's, living up to his role models Lanny McDonald, Darryl Sittler and Ron Ellis, hustling up and down. He is a high-profile former Komet in Fort Wayne through his continued willingness and talent for interacting with the public.

Refs and other officials

Most fans' reactions to the refs can be summed up by the statement of Jim Finks, New Orleans Saints general manager, when asked what he thought of the officials at a particular game. He said, "I'm not allowed to comment on lousy, no good officiating."

As well as the obvious referees and linesmen, a dozen other officials were needed to keep the Komets games running. Dick Zimmerman was in charge of finding and scheduling these folks for many years. The surprising thing is that they were mostly volunteers who performed for the love of hockey and the K's.

"I was given one rule," he says, "Recruit them, but nobody with a season ticket." This was to ensure no one who already had a season ticket gave it up. Each official was given a season ticket for their spouse.

The officials at the Coliseum were: penalty timekeeper; league stats (shots on goal), two; team stats (added by Ron Ullyot), two; scorekeeper and backup scorekeeper; penalty box man, home and visitors; backup official substitute; timekeeper; goal judge, two; announcer; supervisor.

Zimmerman started working as a minor official when McCaig was coach. His parents boarded some of the players at their house, and that led to volunteering at the Coliseum. He was soon the supervisor and continued in the role for three decades. As supervisor he had to be in the Coliseum by 5 for the home games; he would go directly from work. After the game, there would be a recap, which Dick would read to Colin Lister, then it would be sent by telegraph to AP, UPI and the other teams in the IHL. The device was an early form of computer. Once personal computers arrived, they were the mode of transmission.

It would seem that keeping the statistics would be straightforward and simple, but it wasn't. The shots on goal stats published in *The News-Sentinel* and the *Journal Gazette* were kept by the reporters themselves, which accounts for the fact that they rarely agreed.

When Dick was goal judge, Bud Gallmeier got his stats from Dick, which meant *The News-Sentinel* reflected the official version.

What counts as a 'shot'? Dick says, "It's one that would have gone in if no one was 'on the net.' So, if it is blocked by a defenseman, it's not a shot. If it's grabbed outside the net by the goalie, it's not a shot." What about bouncers off the crossbar or post? No.

Dick worked as a goal judge and commented about disallowed goals: "The problem with refs is that, if a goal was disallowed, the ref had to say why publicly. Now they don't. The goal judge was often not consulted, but I changed that. You try to work with the refs, but you have to be tactful. Sometimes the goal judge knows more about what happened." One of the goal judges, Earl Stutmatter, was known as Quickfinger, because he would turn on the light before the puck went in.

At first these people were known as 'minor officials' but this was later changed to 'off-ice officials.' When Welker took over the K's, he offered to pay Dick, the only owner who did so. He also gave the Komet box office manager, Flossie Zimmerman, a \$5000 a year raise.

Although there are a few refs the fans can name, most are anonymous or forgotten. "If you don't notice them, they're great," remarked Terry Pembroke. Nonetheless, he named Sam Cisco, Paul Stewart, Kerry Fraser and Fred Blackburn as good examples. Fred in particular 'didn't care about what the fans said. Quality refs knew what they were doing.'

You had to know how to deal with the refs. "My penalty minutes were for fighting, not for telling the ref where to go," said Norris, "If you treat them nice, they're going to give you a break." Cal remembers a time when a ref said to him, "One more time, Cal, you're gonna go." He says, "One more time and I went. I never talked back to refs. If you did, they'd get you."

Sometimes the captain would act as an intermediary between ref and coach. When Chin was captain, he played this role. "Simsie's got a bad mouth and his voice can carry so I would speak to the ref for him. I'd chat with the ref and not do anything, because there's no point in antagonizing the ref. It did help. Then you'd have a beer with the ref afterward."

Those who did antagonize the ref paid the price. Dr Priddy says he's the only team doctor to get a penalty. "Skeets Harrison was too easy a ref. They were killing each other, I had teeth bites, cuts. I'd only seen two minutes of the game. There was a questionable call in the third

period. There'd been no penalties at all up to that time. I said, 'Skeets, I hope you get hit in the head with a puck so I can sew both eyes shut—you haven't seen anything tonight.' And I got a two minute bench penalty." In his view, Blackburn was the best official, Harrison was the worst. "When Fred Blackburn was officiating he was friendly and firm. He wouldn't let the game get out of hand. There were not as many fights and hence not as many injuries."

As for linesmen, they had no training, which may be why a group of players said, "Most linesmen don't know the rules." Ken Ulliyot shrugs. "Linesmen don't have that big a job." They were often former hockey players who lived in the area and so would be available. Refs were brought in from out of town, but not linesmen. In the late 50s, they were looking for linesmen in Fort Wayne, and Bill Richardson and Hartley McLeod signed up. Hartley later became a referee, with the usual adventures—he once had to have a police escort out of town when he was officiating in Indianapolis. Toledo, of course, was also difficult. He says 'the fans remembered what you did and didn't like it.' He worked from 1959 to 1969 as a ref and confirms, "The more arguing, the more time you got."

Gus Braumberger was asked by Ken Ulliyot to be a linesman. He was reluctant, but there weren't enough experienced people, so he agreed. During the playoffs he had to travel, which meant taking time off work for small pay (at the time, linesman received \$35 a game, \$50 with expenses). He remembers the difficulties of working in Toledo, where the high boards made it hard to jump out of the way and the fans pelted everyone with beer. He tired of it and gave it up, and his place was taken by Bob Zimmerman, Dick and Flossie's son.

Ivan Prediger also trained as a linesman. "I always hated refs when I played," he says, "But we had to go to ref school, up in Haliburton, Ontario, run by Bruce Hood. I went with Barry Jakeman. We drove up, it was at some resort, and there were all the NHL refs. They saw me, and they said, 'What are you doing here?' I told them I was there to teach them how to be refs."

Ivan says that as a linesman, he was in a good position. "Nobody fooled me, because I'd done it all myself. I did have trouble breaking up fights, because I wanted to go at it, too."

He Didn't Get the Recognition He Deserved

Carey Lucyk was born in Winnipeg and started playing organized hockey at seven. Like other Canadian boys, he played plenty of hockey on informal outdoor rinks from November to March every year—Manitoba was cold enough for that. He spent three years with the University of Manitoba team before signing with Minnesota in 1986. He spent a little time in Springfield, Massachusetts, but he knew he was pegged to go to the IHL. He spent that season in Indianapolis, where the Komets coach, Robbie Laird, noticed him: “I had a chance to coach against him—he wasn’t flashy or fancy or a smooth skater but dependable, the kind of player you want to have. He was a defensive defenseman, good at getting the puck out of harm’s way.”

In 1987 he was offered a choice: twenty-five games in Moncton or a year in Fort Wayne. He thought that the USA offered more opportunities, so he came to the Komets. He stayed for eight seasons.

His colleagues agree that Lucyk’s unshowy style led to his not receiving the credit he deserved for steady defensive work. “He didn’t want to be noticed, he just wanted to play at the top of the game,” says Kelly Hurd. He was a stay-at-home defenseman in the style of Guy Lapointe, ready to back up anyone who needed it, even (or especially) if they’d made a mistake. One Komet said, “Other guys heads couldn’t catch up with their legs, but Carey used his mind. He always knew the right spot to be.” Other players might deke him once, but he was always with them and it wouldn’t work a second time.

One reason for his quiet success was that he enjoyed this part of the game so much. “I enjoyed the defense, the two on ones, the odd man situations. I enjoyed stopping a guy from scoring. I got the puck and gave it to a forward in their zone. Penalty killing was one of my favorite parts and I was good at it.” In fact, he was rated one of the top penalty killers in the league in the early 90s. In Blake Sebring’s opinion, “Carey Lucyk was the best defensive defenseman in the league.” But Steve Fletcher says, “Once in a while he got an offensive thought.”

Another reason for his success was that he had the biggest feet. “You’d never get by him, he was so steady.” One of his nicknames was Squeegy Board, because of his six-pack stomach. The other players started by calling him Sweet Lou, but changed it to Sweet and Sour Lou when he was grumpy about music in the dressing room (especially in the morning), and because of his insistence that everything be done right. He

didn't mind, and as the years went by was a mentor to the new or younger players on the team. One said, "He was the team's good uncle."

"If you could combine Lucyk with Jim Burton, you would have the greatest defenseman of all time!"—Neal Colvin.

The Funnest Team We Had

The 1990-91 season began with a bang when the new Komets won their first game 7-3 in Milwaukee wearing their black practice jerseys because nothing else was available. The next night, at the first game in the Coliseum, a crowd of Komet oldtimers was introduced on the ice. This emphasis on the links between the old Komets and the new was to be a Franke trademark.

After their July purchase of the Flint franchise and the Komet name, the Frankes had to scramble to put together a team before the first games in October.

They had agreed with David Dan Welker to take over Al Sims' contract, and to keep three players—Colin Chin, Bob Lakso and Carey Lucyk. Lucyk explained this: "Colin was a high profile local boy, Lakso was an offensive threat. None of us were troublemakers off the ice and we had leadership qualities." Sims was also able to re-sign Lonnie Loach, Stephane Beauregard ("a solid, dependable goaltender, great with his stick") and Stephane Brochu.

Loach was a fast skater with good hands and a big talent, if a little small in size for the NHL. He would be the K's best up-and-coming player that year, leading the league in scoring and winning the Leo Lamoureux trophy. Chuck Bailey observed, "His skating ability was high for the IHL—put him with someone good and he'd take off."

Chin was once again team captain. He said, "We knew from training camp that we had a special group of guys. I called a meeting at O'Sullivan's Pub. Mike Butters sang some karaoke. The camaraderie was built up in that one night."

Probably no one realized what Sims had accomplished. Chin said, "We were all throwaways in a sense—this was a dumping ground." For Ian Boyce, it was 'a band of vagabond characters—Danny Lambert, Chinner, Lax.' The new team's shoestring budget had a payroll of \$800,000; other IHL teams were in the \$1.2 million range. Robin Bawa saw another side: "Everybody was a leader, it happens once in a career. And more important, nobody was in a bad mood."

What happened next was up to Sims. He was still regarded as a new coach, learning how, but he had the full backing of the Frankes and, very soon, the complete trust of the players.

"Al gets the credit for selecting the right players and selling Fort Wayne to them," says Boyce, "Once we got here everyone wanted to play here. The fans were great, the Frankes and the city took care of you. We were a main attraction." It was the old story about Fort Wayne's relationship with its hockey players.

When he arrived in 1991-92, Kelly Hurd was glad to be here. "I wanted the highest level of hockey with the most ice time. Al Sims gave me a fair chance. There were others here from the Red Wings camp. Al had an eye for people who complemented each other. He put together a puzzle." Hurd spent his first year here going back and forth between Fort Wayne and the Adirondack Red Wings (AHL), but was then glad to opt for the Komets, both for the security and the chance for more ice time.

On the ice, Sims came with great credentials ("He'd played with Bobby Orr"), and soon proved that he understood the men around him. He gave them leeway to be themselves, demonstrate their strengths and play the game. His demands were simple: "I expect you to show up and play prepared." The result was that if guys didn't perform, they felt guilty. After practice, he would skate with the players. Often referred to as 'a players' coach,' Sims even socialized with the guys off the ice, leading the charge to the bar if he could. Outside of hockey, Al and the players were equals, and in the nineties that made for a better group effort. Blake Sebring says, "Al used to go in the dressing room and say, 'I want fifteen hits this period.' He'd get 25."

Chin and Sims worked well together. Sims let his captain communicate with the players and his locker room leadership made a difference. "This set the tone for the dressing room," says Chin, "Games are won in the locker room as well as on the ice. Work hard and good things will happen."

The excitement was building about the new team. The fans were enthusiastic. By the second season, there were sellouts at 21 out of 41 home games. Not only the players, but the management deserved credit too. Chin observed, "The Frankes made promises and made good on them. They deserve a lot of credit. The sponsors felt better about it, thinking 'this will be an actual business.'"

New faces in the locker room included Steve Fletcher and Robin Bawa, returning to Fort Wayne after playing elsewhere; veterans John

Anderson and Bruce Boudreau, and Scott Gruhl, who had been a Komet opponent on the Muskegon Lumberjacks for several seasons. "I was glad to see him on our team," said Chin. "Now he was being dirty to somebody else. And he was sticking up for me."

Fletch, Bawa and Kevin Kaminski were a formidable line. Fletch says, "People were terrified of us." Along with defensemen Mike Butters and Tom Karalis, they had a name, too, The Ice Patrol, and made up slogan tee-shirts so they matched off the ice as well as on.

The team's top scorers, Loach, Boudreau and Anderson, were on another line together. Loach had a great year with the two veterans.

A third line was Chin, Lakso and Gruhl. But there were ten forwards (with Boyce, who came and went) and Sims did not want anyone to miss the ice time, so he mixed them up.

Stephane Beauregard's 3.54 GAA of 1989-90 was the best of that season, when he had shared the nets with Ray LeBlanc, Rick Tabaracci and Frederick Chabot. He, Ray and Steve Laurin were the principal netminders in 1990-91 when his GAA was 3.71.

The result was a team who had fun and were good too. "We could beat guys up and still win," said Boyce. "I fought more that season than I ever did." Sims had asked him to do some hitting. "I didn't know he was putting me with the rough-housers!"

Bawa says, "We were a crash-bang unit. People thought that we looked for it, but we didn't." But they didn't pass it by, either.

The team made it all the way to the finals that year, after a 43-35-5 season. They faced the Indianapolis Ice in the first round. Dominic Hasek was in goal for the Ice, and he'd given them trouble all season. In Indy for the game of 21 April, they learned Jimmy Waite would be facing them, and they felt they had a chance.

The Frankes characterize the game as 'a heartpounder.' Both the Ice and Komets were tired, facing their seventh game in ten days. The end of the third period found them tied and they went to overtime. When the K's hit the ice for the overtime period, they seemed renewed, fore-checking and forcing the action. Beauregard was hot, making a big save catching the puck on the handle of his stick.

With 1:40 left in the overtime, Lonnie Loach took a pass from Bawa, slipped between two Ice and took a shot. He was up close and defenseman Cam Russell grabbed his arm, but Loach was able to catch the rebound. Waite's legs were spreading and Loach slipped the puck between them for the winning goal. "We went nuts," says David Franke.

Michael Franke explains: "That game was huge in the comeback of the Komets, a Cinderella story. It swelled our fan base. Suddenly we were selling more tickets to the Kalamazoo series, then when we faced Peoria we were selling out."

They found it tough going against the Peoria Rivermen, until lightning struck in the form of John Anderson and his magic game. They still lost the series 4 games to 2, but somehow it mattered less when everyone knew they'd proven themselves so well.

At the time of the Komets' fiftieth anniversary, Michael saw a program from the 1990-91 season and said, "That was the funnest team we've had." Chin added, "We were that close and that special."

The Greatest Performance in Any Sport I've Ever Seen

John Anderson, the guy Dave Norris had beat for a spot on the Toronto Marlboros in 1973, had a lot of hockey behind him by 1991. He'd made it to the Marlboros, to the Dallas Black Hawks of the CHL, and then to the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Quebec Nordiques and the Hartford Whalers of the NHL. He had spent a season in Italy showing the Italians how to play hockey. "He played like an NHL star wherever he went," said a fan. Despite his age (34) and difficulties with a calcium deposit on his right leg, he had been the number three goal scorer for the Komets that season. He had been the leading scorer but had missed the last third of the season.

Time was making its inroads and by the third game of the IHL finals, Anderson had missed a number of games. No one expected him back. He was limping, hobbling, and stairs were an impossibility.

However, the Komets were having a difficult time. After dazzling efforts in previous playoff series' against Indy and Kalamazoo, they were demoralized facing the Peoria Rivermen. Peoria was a more talented team. The K's had played Peoria ten times that season, and lost them all. The team was missing some guys, from injuries.

When Anderson showed up for practice the morning of 17 May, one player thought, "Gee, this guy can't play." Another said, "He's finally flipped his lid." He managed to skate and afterward told Sims he'd be playing, and did some one-arm pushups to prove he was ready. Sims said they would see.

When the Komets came on the ice that night, the fans were stunned to see Anderson suited and ready, and not wearing his helmet. "He wanted us to be sure to recognize him," said a fan, "The place was

rocking.” Both his own team and the Rivermen were also shocked about the helmet.

Anderson scored a hat trick, one a slapshot from 25 feet away which beat the second period buzzer. With Robin Bawa’s two rebound goals, the final score was 5-2. Kaminski and Fletch had kept the top Peoria scorer, David Bruce, occupied with things other than the puck.

Having managed three goals in two periods, Anderson sat out the third. For the fans and his colleagues, it was an unforgettable night. They said:

“He wanted to do that for everyone else and the 19 other guys who were getting their asses kicked in this series.”

“He sacrificed himself to get us to the next level.”

“It showed that through the pain you could still go. It showed what our team was made of.”

“He felt he was letting the team down. We depended on him for offensive power. He was such an important player.”

“You have a game when you play above and beyond your reach, and he did.”

For one longtime Komet fan, it was the highlight of his time in hockey.

It was Eddie Long who called it the ‘greatest performance in any sport I’ve ever seen.’

Steve Fletcher

Steve Fletcher’s career with the K’s could be summed up by fan Steve Miller’s comment, “Nobody would mess with him.”

Fletch came to Fort Wayne for part of the 1982-83 season, then went up to the AHL and NHL for several years before returning in 1990-91. He was only 20, and at the start of his pro career, when he was first here, but by the time he returned, he came with a reputation as an enforcer. He helped turn the team around during that crucial season.

His reputation started young. Growing up in Montreal, Ian Boyce remembers seeing Fletch’s team practicing before his own, never dreaming they’d be sharing an apartment in the Summit City someday.

“If I’d been small,” says Fletch, “I wouldn’t have made a career of hockey.” He played on AA teams as a defensive defenseman, and didn’t start fighting until he was in junior. “I had a bad temper when I was young. I fought the captain of the team and did well. I didn’t take anything from anyone.”

"We didn't know what to make of him," said Doug Rigler of Steve's first season in Fort Wayne, "He came up with Al Bremner, a kind of Mutt and Jeff team. They had played junior together [with the Hull Olympiques]. He was very tough, I remember him beating the crap out of Paul Tantardini in Toledo." George Kotsopoulos remembered, "He was learning to be tough. He wasn't looking for trouble."

Once his reputation was established, everyone knew where he stood. Kelly Hurd said, "When someone was acting up, they'd send the policeman to patrol. Fletch would whisper in their ear. I don't know what he said, but he got their attention." Robin Bawa agreed, "We all did that, sometimes all three of us to the same guy!"

Asked what he'd say, Steve said, "Oh, 'It's going to be a painful game for you,' something like that." He watched over Chin, and Ian Boyce says, "He always took care of me." Then Boyce laughs, "You could see Steve's method: take off the gloves, adjust the elbow pads, up go the fists, he was always ready to go." Carey Lucyk remembered, "He'd tell you ahead of time, 'We're gonna fight.'"

"He was constantly challenging," observed Bill Richardson. The result was that everyone knew who he was. "We'd get to another city, and someone would recognize Fletch." Fletch's dominant presence on the ice was part of the Komets mystique for the opposing teams and fans. It made a difference for the K's too. Chin said, "Fletch changed the tempo of a game. His presence was enough to deter some of the bad mindset and get us going."

"He was a terror on the ice," said Jack Loser, "But Steve Fletcher is probably the kindest, gentlest guy outside the arena," a sentiment echoed by everyone who knows him.

In the early 90's, the Komets had a rivalry with Indianapolis, featuring frequent brawls. Fletch's bugbear was Kerry Toporowski. Said Chin, "Kerry taunted Fletcher until Steve chased him into a corner and tore his arm out of the socket." Steve had a calmer view: "Kerry went after everyone, he'd stick you, punch you in the head. We hated one another, I don't know why. It didn't help that we played Indy all the time."

Richard Zemlak of Muskegon and Salt Lake City fought like a boxer and everyone was afraid of him. Not Fletch, of course. When he took on Zemlak, 'there were some classic battles.'

There is a sense that it was part of the show for him. Gary Gardner says, "He'd ask, 'What do you want tonight?'" And when Robin

Bawa was playing opposite him, after having been on the same line, they would joke around, playing the tough guys to the delight of the crowds.

Kelly Hurd was once flattened by Steve in practice: Steve was standing still at the time. "He could just do it," says Kelly, "He played a long time, not usual for a tough guy."

Steve's last full season with the Komets (1994-95) was a difficult time. "Farrish didn't want me here," he said, "I had my down times. My wife Theresa was my backbone, my strength. She stopped me from giving up." In the first two games of the 1995-96 season, Fletch had three fights, two goals and 39 penalty minutes, a good Fletcher start to the season. He was traded to Atlanta and retired later in the year.

Ian Boyce commented, "He wears the Komet K on his heart."

The Coliseum

The Komets have always had the advantage of great home ice. The War Memorial Coliseum was newly built when the K's arrived in 1952. Eddie Long remembers, "Nothing was painted and there were no directional signs the first year." The now familiar advertising boards which ring the ice did not come until many years later.

The single piece of advertising in the arena hung over center ice. Wolf and Dessauer, the large downtown department store, had sponsored the scoreboard. Their name was inscribed across the top. This complex scoreboard, which stood two or three times the height of a man, cost \$100,000 and was the only sign in the building. It was part of Wolf and Dessauer's contract that there would be no competitive advertising in the rink for its 20-year run. It is the same scoreboard that Eddie Long's gloves hit when Doug McCaig checked him.

The ice at the Coliseum measured 200 x 85, which was comfortable. The Toledo arena, by comparison, was considered small at 185 x 85. The idea of a full house is a happy memory for many players. "We'd fill the place when we were there," said Gerry Sillers, "What a great rink."

Originally the players and fans could touch one another over the boards; in fact Don Myers said, "The people in the front row sat with their chins on the rail." Eventually the safety glass panels seen today were erected. "When they put the glass up," said Cal Purinton, "It took a lot away, face to face contact, but it saved the fans from injuries." The boards there were 'lively' also: "Now people are hurt on the boards, but in the Coliseum the wall and glass moved, they were forgiving," said

Rob Tudor, "So you could rub out a guy and it sounded good when he hit them. We liked to play the body that way."

There was netting at each end to catch flying pucks, but nothing at the sides until a Coliseum trustee's child was injured by a flying puck. Then netting was introduced at the sides also.

The original box office had been on the mezzanine of the Van Orman Hotel. Flossie Zimmerman ran the Komets box office at the Coliseum for many years, coming to know regular ticket holders not only by their names but by their seat numbers.

As well as paying customers, there may have been 200-400 complimentary tickets per game, for players, advertisers and the opposing teams as well as favored guests. Ticket sales were the principal source of revenue for the club, with program advertizing and souvenirs adding a little. Later, t-shirts and sweats were big sellers.

The programs were originally sold by the concession stands, with ten percent to the Coliseum management, but the Komets took over the sales themselves, paying the sellers a flat fee per night. Unlike other IHL teams, the Komets received no part of the concession stands' proceeds.

The early programs were chatty and more informal with a full team picture, evolving to having more advertising and less information. Programs from the sixties have a player's picture on the cover and his printed autograph inside. By the mid-seventies they had a foldout picture entitled Big Boy of the Week. The contents may have been the same throughout the season, which could result in a midwinter program including players who had gone to other teams weeks earlier. Later programs featured close-up portraits or action shots which fans enjoyed.

There have been a great variety of souvenirs over the years. The 1994 product list included pucks, water bottles, hockey cards, keychains with player pictures, buttons, notebooks, pens, pencils, lapel pins, towels, duffle bags, umbrellas, several types of hats, t-shirts, jerseys and sweat-shirts.

The logos on both the player uniforms and souvenirs have changed over the years, but one of the best-remembered is Captain Komet, which was first used in 1963. John Glenn's recent space flight had astronauts in everyone's mind and Colin Lister had the idea to incorporate the fad into Komets advertising. He said, "He was tying us in with the future, looking ahead. We were going places and so was John Glenn." The original may have been drawn by an artist from a local

newspaper, and the result was produced by Maureen's, a firm in Minnesota. Among the more unusual mementoes were cigarette lighters and watches adorned with Captain Komet. He was used for many years on the uniforms until the cost of producing him became prohibitive and he was replaced by a simpler design.

There were few paid staff, mainly the organist, the announcer and the policeman in the penalty box, with the games being run by volunteers in many ways. The organist from 1952-1965 was Norm Carroll. Players who came from a team with no organist, such as Gerry Randall, found the music distracting. After organist Jack Loos retired in 1996, the organ was replaced by recorded rock music.

There has always been a delicate balance between the Komets and the Coliseum management. Since the departure of the basketball Pistons in 1957, the Komets have been the big building's most important tenant.

Moments of the Nineties

Having proven themselves in the 1990-91 season, the new Komets once more took their place among the other IHL teams. Having done so well, their eye was on winning another Turner Cup.

Al Sims was now an experienced coach. He had the players' respect and this meant he could ask for, and get, a little more from them. It was a combination of his experience as a player, his lack of heavy rules and his emphasis on equality outside the rink.

A successful line in 1992-93 consisted of Paul Willett, Igor Chibirev (both of whom were new arrivals) and Kelly Hurd. Hurd says, "We had no tough guy on our line. Paul made the plays, Chibirev scored and I mucked in the corners. If we needed a tough guy, Fletch was always around." The fans noticed Fletch's contribution too. Longtime season ticket holder Kaye Gengo remembered, "It was Steve Fletcher who kept them fired up in those days."

Asked about that fire, Fletcher said, "Everyone was working and happy. There were not too many times when guys didn't get along. Everyone was equal and friends, not like other places. When I was in Hershey, there were cliques and differences about money." How did the good atmosphere happen? "Al, the Franks."

Willett was described as "compact, he had a little French in him." He spent four seasons in Fort Wayne, becoming the leading scorer

in 1992-93. In 2002, he was still playing for the Bakersfield Condors (WCHL).

The team topped the IHL East with 112 points in the 1991-92 season, but lost in the first round of the playoffs against Kalamazoo. They had a lot of injuries. Said Lucyk, "It was one of the strongest teams we ever had. Expectations were high and then we lost out in the first round. I think we had too hard practices during playoffs. Actually we lost to one guy, Ross Wilson. What could go wrong, did go wrong." Wilson later played some games as a Komet in 1995-96. Bob Chase disagreed about the playoffs: "The players had a bad attitude, too cocky."

Everything came together in 1992-93, when the K's once again led their division, finishing third overall (behind the San Diego Gulls and the Atlanta Knights). They proceeded to win the Turner Cup.

After that victory, Al Sims went to the NHL and the Frankes replaced him with Bruce Boudreau, who had played two seasons with the Komets and had had a long NHL/AHL career. He had appeared in *Slapshot* and could really score. The previous season he'd spent coaching in Muskegon. Fletch said Boudreau reminded him of Scully that way. He was also smooth, as skater and shooter; "everything he did was in one motion."

The transition from player to coach is never easy, and when you are coaching the players you skated with the year before, it's especially difficult. He tried to withdraw from his friends, but "if he yelled at anyone, we were surprised. It's better to coach guys you don't know." Joe Franke said, "He was so laid back I called him The Father Figure. He couldn't get mad even when they were getting cremated."

His long career meant that Boudreau had contacts throughout the NHL, AHL and IHL. He had an eye for talent, too, and was a fanatic about stats. He had the hockey player's superstitions: if they won, he had the same practice the next day, and the same warm-up skate; if they lost, he changed both. He also believed that it took three years to build a championship team. You had a core team and built on repetition.

He didn't get the three years. After a moderately successful record in 1993-94, when the team had made it to the Turner Cup finals, the following season was a disaster. Boudreau was fired halfway through.

Part of the problem was the pressures on the team after the Turner Cup win. Al Sims left, and so did six of the top ten scorers on the team: Willett, Gruhl, Chibirev, Kocur, Richard and Lakso. Chin, Hurd

and Davidson remained, and were joined by John Purves, Vladimir Tsyplakov, Mitch Messier and Doug Wickenheiser who all contributed big numbers. It was a different group of players.

Carey Lucyk summed up the teams of the early nineties: "1990 to 1994 were prime years. We were all staying together, a core group of guys who liked Fort Wayne. With affiliation, players come and go more. The chemistry of minor teams is not interesting to NHL brass. The ones who stayed, we knew we weren't going to the next level. We had commitments here." But Boyce was reminded of the quality of those players: "What didn't we do? We had guys who could play after a night out." And the spirit of the team was always obvious. Chin said, "If you were playing against it, you could feel it, if you were watching, you could see it."

Faced with the difficulties of finding a coach mid-season, the Franks opted to promote another former Komet who worked in the office and as assistant coach. Derek Ray had played college hockey before spending three seasons with the Komets in the late eighties. He was a hard hitter who could really check.

Appointed coach, he was put on the spot. The players were demoralized by Boudreau's firing and the losing season. People expected him to turn things around, both management and fans, and it was too much. As a coach, he was consistent, tougher than Boudreau and expected more physically from the players. His practices were similar to Boudreau's. The injured captain, Chin, was made assistant coach.

The role of captain had changed over the years. By the nineties the sense of responsibility was greater. For Chin, this included making the locker room a sanctuary, acting as buffer with the players and coach, and the management, and ensuring that all the players were on the same page. This made for commitment. The captain also acted as the coach's ambassador to the refs.

Boyce added leadership in training and preparation. He said, "The level of hockey had gotten better, more professional because of better physical training. They couldn't party in the same way."

Bawa says he learned to be a captain by following Chin's example. "The team is a reflection of the captain."

Brent Gretzky said that the captain's own playing must be consistent and up to standard too. He also stressed the importance of seeing one another socially to help the spirit along. "You get pissed and tell everybody off. That's how you keep it all straight." He also

sympathized with the coach, who must act as mouthpiece for the organization at the same time as maintaining friendly relations with the players.

Dave Farrish, an NHL warhorse, was the next coach. He was old-style, no partying with the players and with a stern manner. He had some new ideas, too. Monday was a day for aerobic workouts, with monitors on each player. "He was a fitness freak."

From the first, it seemed he wanted some fresh blood for the team. "He was used to driving younger players and there were lots of old Komets," one player said. "We just didn't have the horses."

Bob Chase admired his skill. "He was a teaching coach, like Ullyot. At the end of practice, he'd be doing some little drill. The players would see it and start doing it, too. It would intrigue them and then it would catch on." Chase said there weren't many teaching coaches left; "if only Ken Ullyot had written a drill book!"

Sebring thinks he was the wrong man at the wrong time. "He knows his systems, but anybody would have failed. There were conflicts with the old players, guys who had been everything to this organization. The result was mistrust on both sides. It was too bad they wasted a great performance by Essensa. It was a fun team that didn't have any fun that year."

1995-96 was a lackluster season, but worse was to come. 1996-97 turned out to be the worst in the history of the team. As of 6 December, their record was 5-13-6. Farrish had been fired on 1 December. The final tally was 28-47-7. Robin Bawa described it as, "One of those years you want to forget. Even the captain got traded in January.⁸ There were lots of injuries, too." The players elected Bawa as the new captain, which the Frankes endorsed. The team welcomed a young, new coach, John Torchetti.

Torchetti was a plain talker who one observer compared to Moose Lallo. New coaches had a system, a theory about coaching. Torchetti knew a lot and wanted the players to be serious and play hard. In his second year, the team rebounded with the MiG Line and he was IHL coach of the year. The Komets were the only team to challenge for the Turner Cup three times in the nineties.

⁸ On 29 November in the midst of an 11 game losing streak, Craig Duncanson was replaced as captain by Guy Dupuis. Duncanson played 61 games for the K's but was traded late in the year to Cincy.

Bawa said that his line (himself, Lee Davidson and Dan Currie) was the number one line in 1996-97 but number two in 1997-98, displaced by the Russians. To keep themselves psyched, the three would talk on the phone two or three times a day, after practice.

Despite the team's ups and downs, the fans remained loyal. The Frankes seemed to know the secret, or, as Gerry Randall said, "The Frankes do a great job of marketing." They had a long list of faithful sponsors and good relationships around the city.

At the time the Frankes took over the team, Bohn Popp and John Popp of Perfection Biscuit Company called Michael offering a major corporate sponsorship, the kind with the name on the jerseys. Michael recalled, "They were instrumental in the financial success of the hockey club in the early nineties. John Popp's reputation was a big help."

The Popp's' interest was explained by Bohn Popp, who had listened to Komet games in bed as a boy, and had been filled with excitement at the idea of the road games.

"It's the most beautiful sport of all if it's played right," he said, "The flow, the speed, the grace, the power. All this is very pleasing to the fans, and they feed off the energy. It becomes even more powerful. In the early nineties, the Coliseum was loud and vibrant, as it could be. Al Sims said it was the loudest arena outside of the old one in Chicago."

The Popp's also had a concern for Fort Wayne, "What a disaster it would have been to lose this team in the midst of a great hockey town." Perfection still advertises with the K's.

One thing which attracted many new fans was the change in atmosphere at the Coliseum. By the late eighties, the stands were rowdy, with fights sometimes breaking out. From the first, the Frankes had banned hooligans, making it clear that any unseemly behavior would result in expulsion. They backed up their policy with security guards. They also literally changed the atmosphere by making the games non-smoking. The result was that whole families are regular sights at the games, which are safe and comfortable.

For the first season in the UHL, the coach was Dave Allison, who had played against the K's in the eighties in Muskegon and Indianapolis. "As a player he was dirty," said Joe Franke, which is borne out by his penalty stats (a magnificent 337 minutes in 1986-87).

As a coach, he was a motivator. "We weren't the most talented team," said Teskey, "But he could get the best from you. He wasn't all about hockey, he was about life too. He's a family man. It was motiva-

tion for life, not just hockey, so we grew over the course of the year after a rocky start. Winning is ninety percent psychology. Preparation is everything. I've been hearing this since I was 17." Jim Logan agreed: "He made you laugh, but you listened and responded to him." Sebring's assessment was, "He was the right coach for the transition from the IHL to the UHL. He was a teaching coach and you could see the team get better."

At the turn of the millenium, was the quality of hockey different to what it had been? A lot of people said yes. Control of the puck seemed less important—rimming was common. "That's good," said Teskey, "It gives people time." Some older players were unsure. "You see six guys in the corner," remarked Joe Kastelic, "You'd be benched in my day. Who's going to score if six guys are in the corner?"

The Hometown Boy

Colin Chin is the only Komet born in Fort Wayne. His parents were hockey fans and started taking him to Komets games when he was a year old. When he was two or three, his favorite player was Chick Balon, but sometimes he would want to be Chuck Adamson at home after games. His parents would have to take shots at him. Colin liked the fact that their season tickets were behind the visitors' bench, so he could slip into the locker room with opposing teams. "I liked hockey right from the getgo," he says.

He started on roller skates when he was three and he wore them out, so his folks bought him ice skates. They were too big, but once they got a pair that fit, he took off the first time he had them on. Skating seemed a natural talent for him.

Colin wanted to start playing hockey when he was four, but there was no equipment the right size and the local leagues started with thirteen-year-olds. At five he went to Gordie Howe's hockey school, where Howe said that a skater like Colin comes along every thirty years. His dad, Roy Chin, took him to Lima, Ohio, where it was possible to skate earlier, and helped organize a Mites hockey league. Colin played there and then moved to a new Allen County league, where he was still playing with older boys. It was the last game of the season before Colin scored his first goal. He made up for it when the next season started, scoring a hat trick early on and then eleven goals in one game in the Parks Board league.

By the time he was playing college hockey in Chicago, Colin was five foot eight and weighed only 145 pounds. Roy Chin observes, "It was a miracle that he did it." Being small was a handicap that only other people saw, since it didn't seem to slow Colin down any.

After an AHL season in Baltimore, he roared into the Komets in 1986-87 with a 75 point season and never looked back, playing for ten seasons. "Impressive longevity for a little guy," said Ron Leef. In 1993-94 he had 100 points. On 13 January 1991 Chin scored 4 goals, making 7 points against Indy in a game the Komets won 10-7.

Colin Lister brought Chin to Robbie Laird's attention. Laird liked the idea of having a home-grown AHL player on the team. He said, "He amazed me, he could slide pucks through people, under people, and was really good on the power play."

In his first year with the Komets, Chin was asked to score, and did. Laird then suggested he move to a more defensive posture, and he did that too. Colin wonders if that was why he lasted so long, since defensive players don't have to worry so much about the numbers.

The line that first year was Chin, Baldwin and Salvucci. "Playing with those guys was great," says Colin, "No one screwed with you. It taught me a lot about team spirit—paying the price for somebody else. The Komets were weaker when they left."

Not only was he a point-getter, Chin was important to the team off the ice. He was colorful, determined to have a ball in the dressing room. If other players were nervous, he had a joke to relieve the tension.

After he became team captain, his people skills were especially appreciated. He had a knack for motivating people, for making them comfortable, even when he was communicating messages from the coach or as the union rep. Al Sims' coaching style included using the captain as a means of transmitting decisions to the team. One observer even said, "He really did a lot of the coaching." His effect on the other players was considered so superlative, one guy said, "When Colin came into the room, it was like God stepping in." Bohn Popp's assessment was, 'the heart and soul of the team.'

On the ice, Colin talked all the time, to his own players and the other team. His best qualities—"speed and smart and guts"—meant that the fans loved him. Being in the spotlight meant that he was often targeted by other teams. Steve Fletcher remembered, "Ken Sabourin [of the Salt Lake Golden Eagles] liked to pick on Colin. If anyone touched him I took it on myself to speak to the guy." Martin Burgers laughed.

"Colin would get himself in trouble being mouthy and then walk away. We'd take care of it."

He could take care of himself, too. His best hockey memory concerns a game in Salt Lake City when Rich Chernomaz hurt Jim Burton. Laird wanted someone to fight Chernomaz, so Colin said he would. He did, and then continued in the penalty box to aggravate Rich, who was angry about the incident happening on his home ice. At their next faceoff, they fought again, and then had a third scrap at center ice.

Many of his contemporaries choose Colin as the best player of his time, and older Komets speak of him as second only to Len Thomson in the history of the team. It is Laird's opinion that his stature, energy and commitment will one day see him in the Hall of Fame.

Turner Cup Season, 1992-1993—The Miracle

The Komets ended the season at the top of the Central Division of the IHL, with 104 points. In the twelve playoff games, they defeated the Cleveland Lumberjacks 4 games to 0, the Atlanta Knights 4 games to 0 and the San Diego Gulls 4 games to 0, an amazing twelve straight playoff wins.

The season had a slow start, but Pokey Reddick had returned to the Komets after a rocky 1991-92 season. He quickly settled in and turned up the heat.

The Komets had reacquired defenseman Jean-Marc Richard from the San Diego Gulls and he began making a mark immediately. When he arrived, Al Sims described him in the *News Sentinel*, "He improves the whole team; he's not just an individual. He picks up your whole squad offensively." The next day, after a Komets-Gulls game, he wondered if the Gulls might be asking themselves if they'd made a mistake.

Blake Sebring explains: "The Gulls had agreed to trade Richard and Peter Hankinson for a player to be named later. Something smelled to high heaven about the whole thing." The player named later was Max Middendorf. Hankinson joined with Boyce and Lee Davidson to form the Hustle and Bustle line, a checking line.

On 19 December, Pokey shut out Kansas City 5-0, and Middendorf scored a hat trick. The season was improving. At the end of the year, Scott Gruhl broke the IHL all-time scoring record set by Joe Kastelic 26 years earlier, with his 552nd goal in the league.

The second Kevin MacDonald to play for the K's came early this season from Phoenix.⁹ This Kevin was a tough defenseman with a lot of IHL experience. Described by Blake Sebring as 'very cool,' Kevin had been captain in Muskegon, and provided some leadership. "We needed a locker room guy with some ra-ra energy," Blake added.

During the break for the all-star game, Al Sims was gone coaching the all-star team. Colin Chin filled in for him. Ian Boyce described the time: "Colin ran practice while Al was gone, very hard practices, maybe two a day. Usually break is a time to rest, but we were focusing on conditioning and a war. The result was we were stronger physically and mentally. We could do anything."

Carey Lucyk agreed: "During the break, the players got together and decided where they wanted the season to go. Boyce's input was important. Colin was always the front man, everyone looked to him. He was a personable guy, people gravitated toward him." Joe Franke added, "It was the guys, it was Chinner. He won't tell you. As a group they all knew, everybody knew everything."

The all-star game itself provided a chance for Pokey to show his stuff. "There was a lot of action," said Bohn Popp, "Not just first shots, but rebounds and second rebounds, acrobatic saves. He was amazing, and then he played that way the rest of the year. He carried it through." Ken Ullyot had observed in 1963, "Usually one player and one goal tender in a league will get hot in the playoffs. That is the team which usually wins."

The psychological boost of that midterm break was augmented by the continued sense, from two seasons earlier, that other teams looked down on the Komets as "the guys nobody wanted to sign." Steve Fletcher said, "We had something to prove."

The players were beginning to look at Pokey in a new light. "Pokey carried us a lot," said Boyce, "In February and March, we were hot and Pokey carried us the rest of the way."

Kelly Hurd describes the situation. "A team gets hot. The best time is the end of the year. Pokey was unbelievable. We went into it with a 'what if' attitude. We won the last games and off we went. Lots of teams thought, 'We'll take 'em.' Pokey was always talented, a great defense and he'd make the saves look like they were easy."

⁹ The first played five games with the K's in 1980-81.

Off the ice, Pokey's outstanding characteristic was his superstitious nature. One player said, "Pokey was so superstitious, he'd sleep with his leg pads on." Whether it was true or not, people believed it could be. Another observed, "I'd never seen a guy who was so superstitious. He needed a lot of attention, two bromos, three sudafeds, two glasses of juice every period in a certain spot." He liked to have his water and tape just so. One game, the stick boys moved them. Joe Franke told them not to do it again.

Joe understood Pokey's needs and everything was in place for him. Did the other players mind? "Not when he played like that," said Chin. "No one played pranks on him. He needed his space."

Pokey was popular with the other players, who knew that his talent—a goaltender's talent—was sometimes difficult to manage. "It's the mental attitude aspect, the confidence," said Doug Rigler, "It's very fragile. You never knew why. If he stopped the first shot it would be a great game; if not, disaster. But he was fun, and funny."

Bob Chase remembered, "The first time he was here, he was a kid, fresh and new. He was a wild guy, showing the others breakdancing." Rigler said Pokey tried to teach Wayne Bishop how to moonwalk. "Wayne was pitiful, and Pokey fell in a garbage can."

Robbie Irons described him on the ice as "a real competitor, enthusiastic, streaky, strong and short. When he got hot, he was hot and you couldn't beat him. He was a standup goalie—he used to kick the puck. He could kick it to center ice. And he'd challenge the shooter." Chin agreed, "He'd focus on the shooter and trust in his own players. And that year, in '93, he was out challenging people in places you wouldn't expect. I haven't seen that before or since."

At the end of the season, when many teams would have been tired, or at least winding down (the K's were so far ahead of the second-place Indianapolis Ice they couldn't be caught), they picked up speed, winning game after game.

The first round of the playoffs against Cleveland is dismissed by the players now. "We spanked them," shrugs Boyce.

The tough set of the series was the one against Atlanta, according to Chin. "We played solid defensive hockey. We were giving up 1-2 goals a game. Our checking line [Davidson/Hankinson/Boyce] was playing other team's top lines. We couldn't have done things without Jean-Marc Richard, the quarterback of the power play."

Popp also gave credit to the Davidson-Hankinson-Boyce line. "They killed penalties better than any line they had. This kind of thing allows your team to play freely, without having to look over your shoulder, no pulling back."

The powerful Atlanta defense had a sixth sense about what the K's were doing. "They were running our power play ragged," said Chin. Boyce agreed, "They figured out the power play—cross crease play. They weren't going to let us in."

One goal sums up the skill and teamwork of the series. Chin describes it: "It was the second game in Atlanta. All those games were one-goal games.

"We had a play where Scotty was in the corner and I was on the side. He would send it back to me and I would shoot from there. The thing was, they knew it and every time we tried it they crashed us.

"You don't really plan plays but that time we did. I said to Scotty, you send it back to me but if he starts coming for me, Jean Marc will get over there and I'll send it to him instead. That's how it happened.

"I sent it to Jean Marc and the guy drilled me and I went down on my knees into the corner, and there was Scotty, on his knees in the corner too. We looked up and we couldn't believe it, Jean Marc was coming toward us. They'd drilled him but he got the shot off and he scored. We all ended up on our knees in the corner but we'd scored. And that was the one that put us to the cup."

Boyce said, "Once we won three it was over."

The series was not without difficulties. They lost Bob Jay, the #1 defenseman, who twisted his ankle when a Knight fell on him. They felt that, because Jay could 'block shots and eat pucks.' Colin Chin, Steve Fletcher and Kory Kocur also missed games. "We were always under-defended," according to Boyce. When Chin was out, Kevin MacDonald was made captain. "He was the natural pick," said Sebring.

That left the Komets facing the league-leading San Diego Gulls.

Were they confident of winning? Carey Lucyk said no. "We knew we couldn't relax for a second, we'd lose our edge. It was not tension, it was excitement. But nobody was gonna say, 'We're gonna win this.' We just kept going. Everyone thought we were played out, but we took it up to another level. We'd practice 30-45 minutes, not get too tired, which was the problem the year before."

Observers agree that the San Diego team had a bad attitude. "We had never beat them that year," remembered Fletch, "They took a

superior attitude—they were higher paid and more talented, but their hearts weren't as big as ours. That'll take us a long way."

The Komets fans were in a frenzy. "They had a special sheet on Komets hockey on every seat of the Coliseum for the opening game of the series," said a fan, "Everything was building. When they won, you were so tickled pink you couldn't stand it."

Tickets were hard to get. Fan John Glasscock wanted to get to a game, but tickets were impossible. He phoned the public library and got the name of the sports editor of a western paper, then called the K's office to say, "We're sending a stringer." He was welcomed to the Coliseum press box and treated royally.

Chin summarized what happened on the ice saying, "The Gulls self-destructed. The players were fighting among themselves, the coach was going off the rails. They thought they would wipe us and then didn't." Chase agreed, "[Gulls' coach] Rick Dudley handed it to us. The players were undisciplined, acting goofy if they didn't like the calls."

Not that the Gulls gave up without a struggle. In the final game, Reddick made forty saves on 41 shots. In the first period, the Gulls had outshot the Komets 17-8, with no goals scored.

After Richard's performance throughout the regular season and playoffs, by now the Gulls would have been sure they'd made a mistake trading him to the Komets. Hurd observed, "You have stay at home defensemen and defensemen you can't get to stay at defense. What you need is a guy who's not a wannabe forward, who just wants to be in the play, but can also get back on defense, like Jean Marc Richard."

Pokey came to the playoffs hot and got hotter. "He could have stopped a marble that year," said Fletch. Pokey was hurt one game, which was worrying. Dave Gagnon, who had supported the team well as second-string goalie through the season, played for the rest of the game ("And did a great job, too," said Hurd). Pokey was back and well for the next game.

Gagnon's big moment was the subject of a later Blake Sebring column, which included Dave's own memory of the game: "Gagnon...made one, and only one, save during the last 5:46 of the game to preserve a 3-2 K's win. 'Some people's claim to fame is something so minute, and mine was possibly that,' Gagnon said. 'It was an easy kick-save. I remember talking to all the reporters after the game making it sound a lot harder than it was. By the end of last year, that six minutes had turned into a period and a half, by the way.'

The team was in fine form, but as Lucyk said, “You can have a great team, but you need a great goalie.” The Komets had one.

Pokey’s special credit carries something extra: credit for Joe Franke too. Hurd said, “Pokey carried us. Joe carried him.” Chase agreed, “Joe would encourage Pokey vocally from the bench. If it hadn’t been for Joe Franke, we wouldn’t have won the Turner.” Which shows how much hockey is a team effort, including the guys who aren’t on the ice.

Chin said, “It was team spirit, toughness and a couple of skilled lines. The snowball was so big you couldn’t stop it. Winning was a validation. You will always be a part of the championship team, having your name on the Turner Cup.” Kelly Hurd liked the snowball image, too: “It snowballed, that feeling of confidence. It built into a big snowball, and then it hit the wall and flew apart into a hundred pieces and there was the Turner Cup.”

Joe Franke’s comment was, “We would have beat an NHL team that year.”

The high point-getters for the team in the playoffs were Igor Chibirev, Paul Willett and Scott Gruhl. The penalty leader was Dave Smith.

“They brought in Sylvain Couturier for four games in the playoffs,” said Boyce, “This was a key acquisition. He scored some big goals for us.” The six foot two left winger had divided the 1992-93 season between the Phoenix Roadrunners (IHL) and the Adirondack Red Wings (AHL). In his four games with the K’s he had two goals and three assists—and his contribution made them seem big in memory.

Al Sims was awarded the coaching Commissioners Trophy and, most fittingly, the Poile Trophy for playoff MVP went to Pokey Reddick. He was also the Komet player of the year.

Scott Gruhl

During a Komets-San Diego Gulls game at the Coliseum on 29 December 1992, Scott Gruhl scored his 552nd goal in the IHL. It was an all-time goal scoring record.

When the game started, Gruhl had two goals to go to beat Joe Kastelic’s longstanding record. The fans had been maintaining a count-down and everyone was aware that this might be the night. It was perfect timing—home ice, a sellout crowd, Gruhl’s family in attendance. Gruhl said later he could feel the lift from the fans.

Al Sims had given him extra ice time and instructed Jean-Marc Richard to feed Gruhl the puck. Richard passed it to Gruhl, who was in an open space. He sent a slapshot at goalie Rick Knickle.

Blake Sebring described the moment in *The News-Sentinel*: "Gruhl kept his head down as he lifted the shot off the ice, but he took a quick peek, quick enough to see the puck go over Knickle's left shoulder and just under the bar." It was extra sweet that the goal was against the leading team in the league, and the best goalie. After the game the Gulls came over en masse to shake his hand.

The record was later broken by Dave Michayluk, who had been a teammate of Scott's on the Lumberjacks in Muskegon. "[Dave] had great hands," said Baldassari, "He shot like Hull, fast and hard."

Gruhl started out with the New Haven Nighthawks of the AHL and had played a few games with the Los Angeles Kings. During the eighties he was a fearsome foe of the K's with teams in Muskegon. "Everybody knew him," said Ian Boyce, "He'd carve your eye out in a moment. The beard and Fu Manchu were part of the aura."

He broke his arm, which ended his association with Muskegon, and he got in touch with Al Sims, a former teammate. Al brought him to join the Funnest Team.

The Komets were glad when he moved to Fort Wayne. "He was very skilled. I was glad he was on our team," continued Boyce. Even retired Komet Ron Leef agreed, "You have a list of people you love to hate. It's a relief to take a guy off that list."

Gruhl was an unusual combination of a high scorer who also had high penalty minutes. Todd Strueby, who played with Scott in Muskegon, said, "He could score too—lots of those tough guys don't, but he did. He was a great team guy." In his last season with the Komets (1992-93), he had 81 points and 290 PIM. One reason for the high points was that "he would shoot from anywhere," said Steve Fletcher. "He'd try to shoot from behind the net. And he scored that way." "He wasn't fast," said Kelly Hurd, "But he worked hard." A fan said, "He was our home run hitter. And he could score from anywhere. He had a turnaround shot, the position didn't matter. It was lethal."

His high achievements led him to expect lots from his teammates too. "He would get hyper during the game, worked up," said one, "He's a talented guy, one you don't want in the penalty box."

He was a stick man, too. He once had an argument with Fletcher, who said, "You're making trouble for yourself, keep that stick in its

holster." Bob Chase agreed, "He didn't like to be checked. If you did, you'd eat some stick."

Not everyone took the stick lying down. When Gruhl was still in Muskegon, he brought the stick up on Komet Mike Butters. Butters brought his fist up in reply and cold cocked Gruhl.

David Franke said, "He was a 'hack and whack' player but if you needed a big goal, or somebody at an important faceoff, he excelled in tight situations. You had to get past the surface to see he was a team player."

In tribute to his scoring record and long career, Scott Gruhl's jersey and stick are displayed in the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto.

Trainers

The job of trainer has changed over the years. Early on, it was a six-months' job and finding someone to do it was both difficult and too easy. There were always guys who wanted it, for the sake of being associated with the sport, but Ken Ullyot complained that there was a lot of wasted time trying to find someone who could be the backup goalie as well. In those days of twelve-man teams, there was no space for a second goalie.

Players define the best trainers as someone who would do anything for them. Merv Dubchak paid the highest compliment to George Homenuk when he said, "Even if you asked him to sharpen your skates three times in five minutes, he wouldn't complain." At the same time, players often take the trainer for granted. Speaking of Steve Wissman, Robbie Laird said, "There are guys behind the scenes who do so much and get no recognition. They mean so much to a team."

Why would anyone want this demanding, thankless job? John Bloom says it's because of the way you feel about the players. "I know it's a business, but you got to have that friendship." When someone asked for something, you didn't mind doing it for him because of that.

The early trainers had no special skills beyond availability and willingness. They were more equipment managers.

George Polinuk described his job as laundry, skate sharpening, checking and repairing equipment, tending to injuries. Lack of funds meant that he did what repairs he could, and took some to a local shoe-maker. The laundry aspect took some time on the road, where the trainer had to hunt for a laundromat. By the time Terry Reincke came along in the 1970s, he was doing an equipment budget including an inven-

tory. He summed it up as, "Waiter, busboy, shoe boy, maybe whipping boy. You have to be a fence sitter, running with the players and reporting to management."

Colin Lister confirmed that the trainer might act as an informational conduit to management. "They were our eyes and ears. A player might talk to the trainer before he'd talk to the coach."

In the early days, when trainers came and went quickly, George Polinuk stands out for his six seasons (1955-1961) with the team. He had worked for Jim Skinner at the Red Wings' team in Hamilton, Ontario. Skinner phoned George at home in Manitoba to say that Doug McCaig was looking for a trainer. It was Thursday night and he was needed in Niagara on Saturday, so it had to be an instant decision. George flew to Toronto the next day.

George says a lot of the job was first aid, although he did have to fill in at goal during practices and played a single game with the team in 1960-61. He eventually went up to Cleveland of the AHL, and from there recommended Homenuk to the Komets. He left hockey for a 'proper job' in 1965. He is now in the Komets Hall of Fame for his contributions to those early years.

John Bloom, a Fort Wayne native and former boxer, was training the Northside track team when he heard Ulliot was looking for a trainer. He indicated an interest and took the job without telling his wife first.

He had no experience, but followed the team doctors' orders carefully and learned how to sharpen skates even to Dubchak's exacting standards. "I asked those docs a lot of questions," he says. Either Priddy or Stuckey were present at all games and even some practices.

The players called him Chopper, or Bongo. Chopper came from a fight he once had, on the ice. Bongo was for Bongo Bailey, an animal trainer, after Bloom told the players they were a bunch of animals.

He wasn't above giving the players technical advice, too. One day in practice, he told them to lift the puck, lift it, so Dubchak sent a shot along just above the ice. In goal, Bloom's feet were knocked from under him and, he says, "I lay there and laughed."

Bloom left after one season, but is remembered for the fact that a rowdy Dayton crowd caused him to climb into the stands, fists swinging. "The fight ended on the ice," laughs Len Thomson, "But the one in the stands kept going."

Both Colin Lister and Dick Zimmerman name Terry Reincke as the best trainer the team has had. He grew up in Fort Wayne, skating at

McMillen Park and begging for the unpaid job of running the skate rental shed there. Bill Berg, who was in charge of the rink, knew Ullyot and before long Terry was stick boy for the K's. He was with the team through the late sixties and early seventies. "That meant Saturday afternoon cleaning the dressing room, and painting the skates. Ken Ullyot was particular about how the team looked."

Terry became assistant trainer, working with Tom Ellis and Roger Gibson, big outgoing guys from Canada. He says, "Being a stick boy or an assistant is being an apprentice." He was then trainer himself, and after three years in the job was the senior trainer in the IHL, indicative of how trainers tended to move in and out. He had hopes of moving up, but the NHL trainers tended to stay put. They had assistants in charge of physical therapy and equipment. Terry took some athletic training courses, but felt he had grown out of the job.

"I had few serious injuries," he remembers, "A few knee sprains, muscle problems, wrist tapings. There were lots of cuts, that was the main thing."

As for the job on the road, he says Flint was a trainer's dream, with the bench accessible to the dressing room during the game. In Toledo, on the other hand, he had to keep the equipment box in the toilet and the skate sharpener in the shower because it was so cramped.

The current Komet equipment manager, Joe Franke, has been with the team off and on for twenty-five years. According to Robbie Laird, he's a 'quality guy, a legend,' and many say he deserves a big credit as part of the 1993 Turner Cup win. Robin Bawa says, "He gets it done no matter what. That's what training is about—no matter who you are." Bawa, who's seen a lot of trainers in seventeen seasons of pro hockey, considers Franke one of the best.

Kelly Hurd pointed out, "Joe believed that to get the most out of players, they needed to have everything. If you had everything, there was no excuse not to do well. He always had what we wanted. I used a Bauer 1000 skate. No one else had them, so he convinced the people at Bauer to get one for me. My Cooper all-nylon glove, it was the same. They weren't even being made any more. He's a man who knows his job."

Joe started by hanging around trainer Jeff Hall and got to volunteer as stick boy. It was exciting to be working 'on the other side,' knowing the players. Then he moved up to assistant, started traveling with the team while still in high school. He didn't do sharpening or ordering equipment, but everything else. "Jay Frye was the one who

taught me a lot. He was a physical therapist specializing in sports. He showed me how to tape and do treatments.” He was taught to sharpen by George Paddock, who ran the skate shop at the Coliseum.

Franke (no relation to the current owners of the team) moved on to Muskegon for several seasons. He helped with the NHL training camp in Pittsburgh and was called up with eight players for the Stanley Cup playoffs in 1991. Pittsburgh won. He calls it the highlight of his career.

In 1999-2000, his title changed from trainer to equipment manager. The UHL requires ‘trainers’ to be certified.

The most interesting training career that came out of the Coliseum is Bill Welker’s. His father said, “Bill grew up in the Komets dressing room.” Bill himself says, “When you’re young and your grandfather owns the team, you’re interested.” Bill’s father is David Dan Welker and his grandfather Ken Ulliyot, both former Komets owners.

He started helping out when he was six or seven, in the mid-seventies. “I don’t remember a time when I didn’t hang around,” he says, helping with sticks and the laundry. He had to stand on the bench to see the games. By age twelve, he knew that training was what he wanted to do in life. The last game of the Turner Cup finals in 1980 is an important memory. “I learned a lesson that night. We lost. The Komets had gone to the dressing room, but I stayed by the bench. The Kalamazoo team were celebrating with the Turner Cup. I said to myself, ‘That’s where it is, that’s where I want to be, winning the championship.’” Which he’s done, winning three with the Shreveport Mudbugs and one in Tulsa.

He says, “My grandmother made me who I am.” The Welkers lived in Roanoke, so Vi Ulliyot made a point of fetching Bill from school to get to the rink on time to help out, and when he was very young and still playing himself, she took him to the 6am games. “Without her, I wouldn’t be in hockey. She gave me the opportunity,” he says.

For a time in high school, he was so busy acting as equipment manager for the Homestead High School teams he was away from the Komets, but after his father bought the team in 1986, he returned as equipment manager.

His memories of the games come from a different angle than the players’. “I see the game differently. I’m wondering, ‘Who’s getting hurt? Who needs equipment?’ not about the goals.”

Steve “Swiss” Wissman was the trainer when he arrived. Steve had been a stick boy with Bill years before, and had left school to join the team, as Bill did. Steve was the last guy to do both the trainer’s and

equipment manager's jobs. "In the late 80's, everyone else was splitting the jobs up, so I suggested to my dad that we do it too. Steve was happy with the idea."

Steve had cut his hand the season before, followed by an infection in which he lost a finger. He taught Bill how to sharpen. "I started out doing stick boy stuff," says Bill. "I learned a lot." He and Steve had learned from Joe Franke in his first stint as trainer with the Komets. "Joe's another big reason why I got into it, he deserves credit," says Bill. "He took care of me around the rink and kept me out of trouble. Joe had an organized way to hang up the gear, which I still follow. I also learned from Craig Smith, who was here before Joe." Smith spent the 1978-79 season in Fort Wayne, then went on, eventually training for the Stanley Cup winning New York Islanders.

Bill spent a lot of time as stick boy on the opposing team's bench. "It was interesting. People didn't know who I was. The players were great and I loved it. Lots of kids wanted the job."

Laird told Bill to follow Steve's advice in that first year as equipment manager. "I was learning. I did set up, cleaning the room and hanging the gear." At Christmas of the second year, Steve's hand began to swell. Eventually David flew him to the Mayo Clinic, where it was attended to. His hand was saved, but he lost another finger. While he was recuperating, Bill took over as trainer. Laird said, "You can do it." Bill was unsure, but Robbie had confidence in him. Bill says that he worried he would not do the skates right, but told himself, "This is what you want to do with your life, so you better learn." He'd be there for hours and knew the guys did not know how much time he spent on it. "You know how they are," he says, "Colin Chin would tease me, 'I can't even stand in these skates,' and I'd take it to heart. But I learned."

Swiss returned for the playoffs, but left the following season and was replaced by Rich Oberlin. Rich had also learned as a stick boy under Joe Franke years earlier. Bill moved to Albany when the team went in 1990-91, and the team folded.

He remembers those years as a learning time, when his wish to be a trainer took form. "I went out to a bar with the players. I was young and hadn't been out much and they got me a little drunk. I was in bad shape the next day and I left practice sick. Swiss told me Laird wanted to see me, so I came back to the Coliseum. Laird took me to his office and said, 'Remember, don't do all the shots the team gives you. Show up and

do your job. You always have to do the job.' I've followed this since, never missed a game."

Bill likes to think about Gunner Garrett, a legendary trainer-equipment manager. He had thirty years in various leagues, and in 2001 was given an award by the equipment managers' conference for service in 2500 games. Bill, who has 1800 games under his belt now, asked Gunner if he remembered him from his stick boy services years before. "Son, I know everybody," said Gunner, "I've had 'em all in 2500 games." Gunner suggested that nobody would ever catch up to him, but Bill said he would eventually. As he does it, some of Fort Wayne travels with him. "I started out as a Komet, and I'll always be a Komet."

Ian Boyce

Ian Boyce came and went throughout the nineties. He was part of the Funnest Team.

"I was a defensive type forward playing for the Rochester Americans in the AHL in the fall of 1990. I had played twelve games and did okay, but I felt a lot of pressure there. I was a little older than the other rookies. Come November, I got a knee injury and was out for a month. In January '91, they sent me for rehab in Fort Wayne. I never knew where it was and expected to be gone a month. I had said I wanted to play and this was the solution—Craig Ramsay, the GM of the Buffalo Sabres was a friend of Al Sims."

Boyce describes himself as a physical player, not big but aggressive. He was also a hard worker, nicknamed The Grinder. David Franke called him 'a leader, because of his work ethic,' and Fletcher observed, "Fans liked him because he worked hard all the time. Fans know."

Boyce grew up in Montreal, where he asked for his first skates at the age of three. In 1985 he was playing for the Lac St Louis Lions in the Midget AAA league, the best in the city. The Lions won the championship that year. His best coach was his dad. "He'd analyze games in the car on the way home, and give advice."

After playing for the University of Vermont and the Canadian national team, he was drafted by the Sabres and sent to Rochester. Over the next few years he returned briefly to Rochester and played in San Francisco as well as with the K's. In 1997, he thought of returning to the Komets after a year in Kansas City. "I told them I was available but Kansas City was offering a one-year contract. The Komets offered two

and KC backed off. I came back to end my hockey career here.” In 1998-99 he was the team captain.

“He led by example. And you could confide in him—some things you can’t discuss with management,” said Carey Lucyk. Jack Loser echoed others when he said, “He’s a perfect gentleman, courteous, with never an unkind word.”

Perhaps he wasn’t intense enough to be a star player, but Eddie Long thought he deserved more than the stats showed. “With all the work he did, he should have had fifty goals a season. He had no luck at all. I could stand in the shower and get a goal. Some guys couldn’t get one if they were in the crease, no fault of theirs.”

When asked if being black had been a barrier, Ian said no. “If you’re a good player, they don’t care what color you are. And I’m not going to worry about some bum who’s drinking beers. After all, he’s paying my salary for the night.”

The MiG Line

The early nineties saw the first Russian players coming to North America. Ian Boyce explained, “It was going on in the NHL and we wanted one too.” The Komets had a connection with the Winnipeg Jets. Al Sims went to Russia with the Jets general manager and saw Igor Chibirev there. He began his North American career here.

“We didn’t know what to expect,” said Boyce. When he arrived, Chibirev had no skates, so Kelly Hurd gave him his backup skates. He impressed right away. “We’d be surprised by the things Chibirev could do,” said Steve Fletcher.

The first barrier was language. Chibirev understood no English, but the players could communicate by pointing, and a lot of the communication was universal, like chalkboard talks. “Once he’d scored a couple of goals for us, he was one of us.”

The language difficulty was one the Komets had faced before. Robert Millette (1981-83) could not speak English and Dan Sanscartier’s was halting. To help Igor, the Frankes brought in a translator to help out, Boris Zinchenko. He might come to practices or games, but was more present for legal meetings or appointments.

The Frankes explained why Zinchenko’s help made a difference. “If they were comfortable, they could perform on the ice. Most teams did not have the support of the translator. The Russian players talk to one another and a lot of them came here because of how they were treated. It

was extra work for us but it paid off." In the ten years since Chibirev's arrival, the Komets have seen sixteen of these players, and in 1998-99 there were times when the team had five of them on the ice at once. David Franke said, "I'd like to be known as the General Manager who brought the Russian influence to the Komets and the IHL."

The differences in style were always apparent. They were balanced, agile skaters. Lucyk observed, "They'd be skating on you and suddenly they'd be skating sideways." They were always in motion, playing "a swirling game, not an up and down game."

Boyce enthused, "Could they skate! When we watched them, it was like watching the Red Army team. If we tried to hit them or stack them up—they would just wind it up, come back to our zone and head down on the rush. They wanted it to look pretty." Hurd compared them with the Americans: "We were more up and down the ice. They were good skaters but not raw accelerators. They wouldn't give the puck up, they'd move as a squad. We would dump and chase and bang the body."

Robbie Laird spoke generally about the European players. "They brought a new level of puck control skills—they liked to keep control of the puck, that's different to us, they don't like to give it up. We would give it up to move it into the opponent's territory. Their game is less physical too. Hockey is a skillful game, first and foremost. Not nice finesse, but skill."

Fletcher put it plainly. "They made guys look like pylons. They had good hands, nice to watch. With our players, it was balls to the wall. In Europe it was more like tic-tac-toe with passing and speed."

Chibirev was so smooth, he could make other players look stupid. His success that first year led to the AHL and then half a season with the Hartford Whalers, but he didn't like it there. The K's brought him back for a season, and then he returned to Europe. "He enjoyed playing here," said one observer. "He was at home on the ice, it was a joy for him. And he created opportunities for other players."

In 1993-94, Vladimir Tsyplakov arrived. It was his second season in America. Bob Chase called him, "The best all round complete player. He could skate and had a big shot. He went to the LA Kings. I don't know how we got him. He was for real." After five seasons with the Kings and two with the Sabres, Tsyplakov returned to Europe.

Colin Chin and John Purves played on a line with him. Chin called him the best overall of the Russian players and observed, "It was a good line—we made each other better players."

Were there difficulties in reconciling the physical and cultural differences? The Franks said, "The rap on the team was that they were soft, but they battled just as well as the American players." To Carey Lucyk, they were tougher off the ice than on, the opposite of most hard-hitting Americans. Bawa said, "Some European players don't show up as much as North American ones do, but it was not a problem here."

The language barrier did cause problems too. Jim Logan said, "On the ice especially, they're yelling and you can't tell what's being said. We were always trained to talk on the ice to tell where you are. When you're standing in the corner with the puck, you can't see. The other players will tell you what to do. There would be confusion about what to do with the Russian players." But Chin says they understood more than they let on.

As time passed, the Russians in Fort Wayne had more American experience and their English skills had improved. A pinnacle was reached in 1997-98 with the powerhouse dubbed The MiG Line.

Konstantin Shafronov spent a season in Fort Wayne in 1995-96, then went up to the AHL for a season. When he returned here in 1997-98 he was joined by Slava Butsayev and Andrei Bashkirov.

Butsayev had been in the NHL. "He had the package," said David Franke, "The body, a decent skater, great hands and passing." Bob Chase agreed, "Butsayev had talent to burn but no drive. He still made it to the NHL." He thought Bashkirov was the dynamo behind the success of the MiG Line.

They spent two seasons here, then went on, Butsayev to Grand Rapids, Bashkirov to the AHL and a few games with the Montreal Canadiens, and Shafronov to other AHL and IHL teams.

When Bawa was captain, he said, "The Russians didn't say much. They spoke through me. They were the three best players in the league—so what they said, people listened."

The 2002 Olympics produced a spectacular upset when the little-rated team from Belarus defeated the powerful Swedes. The Belarus team included four former Komets—Vladimir Tsyplakov, Oleg Mikulchik, Sergei Stas and goalie Andrei Mezin.

The First Indo-Canadian in the NHL

Robin Bawa was the first Indo-Canadian (person of East Indian descent) to play in the NHL.¹⁰ He spent five seasons, spread over thirteen years, with the Komets.

He first played here in 1987-88 and then went on to Baltimore under Robbie Laird. At this time, Fort Wayne had some connections with the Baltimore Skipjacks of the AHL and the Washington Capitals of the NHL. After a lacklustre season in 1989-90, Bawa wanted to be a free agent, but he was on Washington's protected list. Laird offered the chance to revive his career but Bawa chose a different route, signing with the K's. Laird had recommended him to Al Sims, and he became part of the Funnest Team.

Robin Bawa played his junior hockey in Kamloops, British Columbia, under Ken Hitchcock, "one of the best coaches I've had." He was a leading goal scorer. At six foot two, Bawa is big, and when he was twenty, he was told, "Play tougher." He reflects, "You get the hint, otherwise you don't play." Bob Chase said, "He was a scoring machine then, very talented, but he was so big they made him an enforcer. His skills were blunted." Martin Burgers commented, "It went against the grain of his personality."

After a Washington training camp, Bawa was sent to Fort Wayne in 1987. He thought he was coming to Fort Worth, as so many others had before him. He says Todd Strueby taught him a lot that year. "He was tough and a goal scorer. He showed me how to be an all-round player." He also enjoyed the intense coaching of Robbie Laird. "You have to be good every day. It helped the whole team."

Asked about Bawa, Strueby said, "He had raw talent, and a pure excitement, a desire to play hockey. I encouraged him. He was unselfish, he'd do whatever was asked of him. I said to myself, 'I wish I was like that when I was his age.'"

Did his different race cause any difficulties? Bawa says, "Not so much in Canada but when you go to the US it's different. It toughened me up some." Laird's memory of Bawa emphasizes the toughness, too. "He was a big guy who evolved into a physical player so he could make it to the NHL, hitting and fighting. He made every check count."

Ian Boyce described his friend as 'an intimidator.' "He had great skills, to begin with—a good skater, he was tough and could hit." Boyce

¹⁰ There have been no Indo-Americans in the NHL as yet.

concluded that Bawa was hard to describe. According to Bohn Popp, he had ‘an air of real professionalism.’ Blake Sebring said, “He was a tough guy who could really play. I’m not sure he gets credit for that.”

In 1992, Bawa had a good training camp with the Vancouver Canucks. “I had eight fights in three days. I made an impression. I had the second most goals on the team and the second most penalty minutes.” He was called up in February, but spent most of the season with the Milwaukee Admirals. He later played in the NHL with the San Jose Sharks and the Anaheim Mighty Ducks.

Al Sims was the assistant coach in Anaheim. Bawa’s career is marked by the fact that he also played elsewhere with various Komet colleagues (Sims, Laird, Boyce, Farrish, Bill Houlder).

“For sixty games, I practiced, dressed and then didn’t play. It was the best shape I was ever in. My all round skills got better.” Despite the disappointment of not playing (he managed only twelve games with Anaheim), he remained confident through the support of a close family, especially his sister.

In 1996-97, Bawa heard that the Franks wanted him back and he returned to Fort Wayne in November. “I had to prove myself to Farrish, but then he left in December.”

Bawa was captain of the K’s for a time, but the 1997-99 seasons were marred by a series of accidents which led to four concussions. After the last, the doctors told him he had to retire. Now living in Vancouver, Bawa and his family are proud of his place in NHL history.

Players Come and Go: The Nineties

Bob Essensa was “the best goalie in the league,” according to David Franke. His great season here in 1995-96 sent him back to the NHL. He had spent some games with the Komets in 1988-89 also.

Those earlier games started badly. “The first game he played here we got smoked 5-3,” remembers Martin Burgers. “He let in five and pulled a groin muscle. It didn’t bother him—he had the right attitude, confidence in self. And he’s still playing.”

He was sent to the IHL because the AHL would have held him back, as a young goalie. He came with a great attitude, and an NHL paycheck that was the source of much speculation and joking by his teammates.

Andy Bezeau “was a fan favorite, number two after Steve Fletcher,” according to David Franke. “He was the first Energizer

Bunny, played hard and would fight anyone. He wasn't big, but he'd get up a head of steam and start chasing some guy. The fans would see it coming and he'd cream him." Kelly Hurd described Bezeau as "100 percent kamikaze."

Bob Lakso was one of the players brought back when the Franks rescued the Komets in 1990. "I knew why they kept him," said Ian Boyce. "He was fast and had a hard shot."

Lakso played college hockey in Duluth and was with the Indianapolis Ice in 1988-89. "All I do is kill penalties," he complained and Bob Chase explained, "It was all goons on that team." The next year Lakso moved to Fort Wayne.

"He had a great feel for openings, fast," said Chin. Bob Chase said, "He was a great skater and played a gentleman's game, no fights. He was a headlong dasher, that's how he broke his ankle." Kelly Hurd remembered him as 'another underrated player, having fun, not flashy—he wanted the team to be noticed.'

For Bohn Popp, Lakso provided an unforgettable moment on the ice. It was during the sixth game against Kalamazoo in the semifinals of 1991. Late in the third period, the score was tied and it looked like overtime was inevitable.

Danny Lambert made a little move to go by the Kalamazoo defense and feathered the puck out to the center. Lakso was coming down the ice. "One of the things about Bob," says Popp, "Was that he didn't have to catch the puck. He could just nail it on the fly." He did, and it sailed high on Larry Dyck's glove side into the corner of the net. A beautiful play. The arena erupted. "It was an amazing goal, NHL style," said Popp, "It took a perfect shot to beat him and he got a perfect shot. There was no mistake on Dyck's part. It put them to the next series."

In the late nineties, when the team was not flying so high, a group of fans held up a banner inscribed "Remember the Roar: Lakso from Lambert" with the time of the goal, to urge the players on.

Kevin Kaminski wasn't big, but he'd fight anybody, any size. "He was fearless and aggressive," said Boyce. "He'd do anything to win and every night. He also had an accurate shot."

He would crosscheck guys in the face, and get the same back. If he was knocked out, he'd be back in five minutes, ready to fight again. In his one season with the Komets (1990-91), he racked up 455 PIM.

It was Kaminski's hands that one fan remembered. "He had these strong hands and wrists. When he was focusing, you couldn't get

the puck away.” Other teams’ defensemen learned not to tangle with him. “If you pushed the wrong button, it would become a shark attack.”

John Purves had a move that worked for him. With John coming in on the short side, the goalie would stoop. John could put the puck right underneath the crossbar. “I don’t know how he did it,” said Chuck Bailey. “But it worked again and again.”

Doug Wickenheiser had been playing pro hockey for more than a decade when he came to the Komets for his final career season in 1993-94. He’d been with several NHL teams and the Canadian national team in 1989. “His curse,” explained David Franke, “Was that he had been the Montreal Canadiens number one pick overall in 1980 and had never fulfilled expectations. It haunted him.” However, he’d scored a big goal in St. Louis and they still remember him there. Franke felt Doug would have made a great coach, from the help he gave to Bruce in ’93-94. Doug died of cancer in 1996 at the age of 35, and the Komets wore a sticker on their helmets for a full season in his honor, a candle with a big wick.

Guy Dupuis came to the Komets for a few games in 1991-92, then returned for the next seven seasons. “He was a stay-at-home defensive defenseman,” said Steve Fletcher, “The kind you want on the team. His shot wasn’t the best. I used to call him Flicky Dicky. He’d make a wrist shot and I’d say, ‘What was that?’” “Sometimes the solid ones last longer than the ones who are exciting,” commented Bawa.

“Every year in training camp he’d be on the bubble,” said Chase, “Then in the spring you could count on him.” “Players like him,” said Hurd, “The stats don’t reflect the play. You have to see what he did. He was an asset.” He was also very strong. A junior coach had told him to do a hundred pushups and situps every night, so he did. He was also the last guy off the ice at practice.

Danny Lambert was in Fort Wayne in 1990-91 and 1993-94, between which he’d been in the AHL and played for the Quebec Nordiques of the NHL. He now plays in Europe. Lambert is five foot eight, and “if he’d been six foot two or even five-eleven, he’d be in the NHL,” according to Carey Lucyk. He was a fast, smart player, with a knack for offense. Robin Bawa said, “He was young, at the start of his great career. He was just developing, you could see the talent he had. He was a future Brian McKee, the same kind of player.”

Len Thomson described Brian McKee as “Maybe the best point man we had. A good point man shoots and can keep it low without being blocked. He was good at getting the puck around the net, that was his

expertise. He could shoot it low and very, very hard. It's the type of shot forwards like to tip in."

Kevin MacDonald, who had ended the 1992-93 season as team captain, played for the K's at the beginning of the 1993-94 season, then went up to the AHL. He also played his only NHL game that year. In 1996-97, he returned to the Komets. "He tried to show the younger guys some things," said Sebring, "But they wouldn't listen. That team was wrong from the beginning." Kevin is now coaching. Blake describes him as, 'a standup guy, doing dirty work in the corners, in front of the net.'

Max Middendorf, a native of Syracuse, New York, is six foot four. "He had all the skills," said Bob Chase, "But he lacked the people to motivate him. He sure could dance." Bohn Popp agreed. "He was one of the most gifted players, he seemed destined to be an NHL star. At times you could see his talents shine, he could take over a game. I remember one midseason game he scored two goals in the last minute."

After playing for a variety of teams, including some games in the NHL, Middendorf is now a referee. "He'll be a good ref," said Chase, "He understands the flow of the game." Pembroke also thought he'd do well in the new job, "because no one will be able to intimidate him."

Middendorf gave Komet fans a glimpse into the difficulties of hockey psychology at the time he scored a hat trick in December 1992. It came after a dry spell, when he'd spent three games watching from the stands and had not scored in five outings. When asked how he felt before the hat trick, he replied, "How about feeling like quitting?"

Grant Richison played for the Komets 1991-1998. "He has lots of skills," commented Bob Chase, "But no killer instinct." He is a physical culture addict, 'built like an Adonis,' according to Chase, which must have stood him in good stead when trouble struck. He was also a motorcycle addict, and a serious accident looked likely to end his career, but he returned. "He amazed me," said Kelly Hurd, "He went through rehab and came back bigger and stronger." He is also remembered for having started a Bible class for the team.

"I never saw a defenseman who hit harder," said Sebring, "But he wasn't fighting. He was great in the 1993 playoffs. The opposition never scored when he was on the ice. He always took out the guy who could have scored."

Aside from the effect he had on the ice, Jean-Marc Richard holds an off-ice Komet record, too. At the 1992-93 jersey auction, his fetched \$3500, the most of any in the history of the club.

Changing Leagues

Perhaps the biggest event in recent years for the Komets was the decision to leave the IHL and move to the UHL.

People's attitudes to the various leagues and the players' chances in each have been an important theme throughout the history of the team. In the early days, there were only six NHL teams and the very best players—Len Thomson is always used as the example—were forced to play elsewhere because there simply were not enough places for all the talent. This was good in some ways, because the quality of hockey in the IHL and AHL was high. One player observed, "The Western and Eastern leagues were a bunch of goons. *Hockey News* didn't even cover them."

There was a pattern to what happened, according to Bob Chase. A player would be supported by an NHL team, but after a couple of years he'd be dropped, go home and play senior hockey. ('Senior' had little to do with age.) Other guys would try the IHL because it meant they still had opportunities to play pro.

Chase says that if they had only been given a chance, they could have shown what they could do. As an example, he cites Len Ronson. Ronson was drafted by the New York Rangers and had a great training camp. The season opened and Camille Henry was injured. Len had a chance to play, scored a goal and in the second game had the team's only goal. Despite this impressive start, he was dropped by the Rangers after 13 games. He later had a huge career with the San Diego Gulls (WHL).

"Sometimes you say to yourself, 'How did he get up there?'" said Burgers, "Sometimes a coach gives you the chance, you get to go even though you're not quite good enough. But you get to play 35-40 games, and the next team sees you've been playing up there and they take a chance on you too. You get 35-40 games each time, you keep getting there." He is also philosophical about players in the I, mentioning one star player with the words, "He didn't have the size or he'd have been up there. There's always a reason we're down here."

Stubby Dubchak says, "There wasn't much difference between the AHL and the IHL in the sixties." The phrase which haunted many later players, "You'll die in the I," did not exist in the fifties, says Eddie Long. "That was a creation of the NHL, later." Tom McVie says, "Fort Wayne people were very fortunate in those years. The teams they had were outstanding and great value for the money. And the IHL was a stepping stone for trainers, coaches, managers, you name it, as well as players. They knew how to run hockey as a business."

Although every player harbors a hope of playing in the NHL, "Some guys are happier in the lower leagues, because you don't have to work as hard," said George Stanutz. The situation this created meant that IHL players might manage longer careers, or longer periods with the same teams, especially in the fifties, sixties and seventies. Todd Strueby said, "One mistake I made was not to work hard enough at first. I didn't think I had to, being in the minors."

Robbie Laird characterized the IHL as 'a man's league.' "The IHL never garnered the respect it deserved. It was a man's league. There were good players from junior and college programs. You had to have courage and commitment to survive." Terry Pembroke said, "It took a peculiar talent to play where you did." For a teaching coach like Gregg Pilling, "It was easier coaching in the I."

In the seventies things began to change. "The IHL was a grooming league," Dave Norris explained, "Only if they ran out of room did you go to the IHL. Everyone was looking for places, the IHL teams would get lists of probable players. At that time [1972-74] the NHL teams signed all the draftees. By 1975 they had too many guys under contract. They had total power over players' lives." Since they were being sent to IHL teams under protest, and with little chance of making it back up, disgruntled players began to think they would 'die in the I.'

"My first impression was that it was a bad league for a young kid. I thought I'd die in the I," remembered Ron Leef. Said Doug Rigler, "They used to say that if you got sent down to the I, it was time to get a lunch box and go home. It was a dead end."

Perhaps the quality of play in the IHL did dip during the eighties. "I was not happy about the I," said Steve Fletcher. "It was a *Slapshot* league. My first game Ron Leef got crosschecked in the face, John Hilworth dove into the bench. It was not what I expected. It became a better league in the nineties."

From the viewpoint of a veteran observer, Chase saw a different side. "The biggest problem we had were guys coming down, attitude wise. They had no heart in the same way, they were not as willing to get hurt. They'd be the second guy in because they didn't want to take the hit." Terry Pembroke agreed, "There were a lot of guys with degrees who didn't want to 'waste' themselves in the I." Speaking as a man who had played and watched intelligently, Doug Johnston said, "The IHL had a bad rep then. The [Philadelphia] Flyers were no different. You have to

remember that filling the seats is what it's about. No different than at other times. Now is really the *Slapshot* era."

Once the new players had adjusted, they began to see the better side of the I. The shock of seeing the older players, difficult at first for Doug Rigler and Wally Schreiber, was smoothed away by the friendships that developed and finding you could learn a lot from the veterans. Fletch also found it was more relaxed here. "A lot of guys here weren't worried about going to the NHL. Here they were relaxed about that. There were always guys worried about hustling their way to the NHL, you were always hopeful at least at first."

Kelly Hurd said, "The older players were not NHL prospects now, but they had been. It's everyone's goal to play in the NHL. Hockey players are very competitive, whether playing hockey or playing cards. You have to accept eventually that this is your place." For Ron Leef, "You're living in Fort Wayne and playing in the IHL. If you can't have fun, what can you do?"

By the nineties, the new breed of player saw the I in a different light. Ian Boyce observed, "The IHL was not supported by the NHL the way the AHL was. It suffered. We saw ourselves as playing on a level with the AHL."

Robin Bawa agreed. "The IHL was just as good as the AHL. Half the NHL had their farm teams in the IHL. The IHL was more of a goon league in the eighties, but improved later. Hockey got better in the nineties."

Then why would the Komets consider leaving the IHL after almost fifty years, especially with their long history in the league and the prestige that went with it?

The league had expanded quickly, and the result put a financial strain on the various franchises. A longtime fan explained, "Part of the reason for the demise of the IHL were the long distances to San Francisco and Las Vegas. When the fans could go on the bus, it was better. How do you get the rivalry going when you don't know the San Francisco team, anyway? There was a lack of competitive edge."

Another observer said, "The players lost their hunger. They were getting inflated salaries, there was no need for them to think about moving up. They didn't have to play hard every night—in the NHL you do. The league never got over this."

From the time the Komets started, there were constant changes in the league, with teams folding and starting up. The business side of

hockey is a precarious thing. Even leagues themselves come and go. As early as February 1955, Bob Renner suggested that the AHL and IHL might meld, forming east and west divisions of a Midwestern League to save on travel costs.

In the end, the K's left the IHL and within two years, the league had folded. A fan said, "The Komets were the IHL. The Komets getting out of the IHL was an embarrassment to hockey." One interesting detail is that George Drysdale, who scored the first Komet IHL goal, was present for the last one, and then the first in the UHL.

Terry Pembroke looked into the future of the UHL. "The UHL could be like the old IHL if they promoted it right. Minor pro sports are built by having players involved in the community. That's the trick. People saw Eddie Long as part of the community and that mattered."

A Hockey Community

It's one thing to see a group of guys who played together laughing and talking over a beer. It's another when you realize that the group of former players represent different generations, different teams. There is something about having played the game that makes a bond.

In a hockey career, any player meets a lot of other guys. There are the ones who were on the same teams—midget, bantam, junior, pro, senior. There are the guys from the opposing teams. Then there are the guys who played against the guys who played with you. And there are guys you just heard about. The result is a network, a hockey community that spreads across the North American continent. Tom McVie observes, "One year playing and you're in for life."

Many of the players shared experiences. How many Komets spent time with the Springfield Indians of the AHL? It was owned by Eddie Shore, 'possibly the best defenseman in the history of the NHL' (at least until Bobby Orr came along). Shore's outsize personality meant that everyone who passed through remembered what happened, some, such as Reg Primeau, gratefully. Others, such as Ted Wright, were glad to get away. Komets with a shared Shore experience included Jim Baird, Mike Clarke, Jim Wilcox, George Kotsopoulos, Jacques Gagné, Terry Ewasiuk and Bob Bailey.

It might be another player who really makes an impression. Jim Logan met up with Matt Martin, a former Toronto Maple Leaf, when he played in Kalamazoo. "He taught me a lot, put things in perspective. He came over and made me feel comfortable, spoke to me and I felt like I

was meant to be there. It takes a real person to show that kind of leadership.”

Plenty of times you played with somebody in junior and they showed up again after you turned pro. Rob Tudor and Al Dumba have spent a lifetime playing with and against each other. Everyone remembers spending time in junior with the guys who made it big later. “We played against the St. Catharines Blackhawks when Mikita was there.”

John Goodwin has three brothers, Arlo, Art and Charlie, who also play hockey. Reg Primeau has played with two of them and Reno Zanier with all three.

When Ron Leef was playing junior hockey in Brantford, Ontario, he lived with Jim Burton’s parents. When he came to Fort Wayne and found himself playing with Jim, it was natural that their connection would give them a bond which developed into a friendship. They were even roomies on the road.

Sometimes when you met somebody later, it was enough that you’d all played in the same rink, even at different times. Gary Young was born in Flin Flon, Manitoba, where Cal Purinton and Emil Gilles played on the team. Others from the western Canadian league remembered playing there too—it was one of the coldest arenas on the circuit. “There was hoarfrost on the boards,” remembered John Goodwin, “And it would be 25 or 30 below outside. The place was little and dark, but it had a great hockey team.” Norm Waslawski knew Ken Ullyot from the days when he coached the Prince Albert team against Flin Flon, because the two benches were side by side.

The huge gathering known as training camp was a meeting-place too. Doug Rigler, Wally Schreiber, Ken Goodwin and Rob Motz were all at the Capitals training camp in 1982. “I knew them before I got here,” laughed Rigler, who was on a line with Schreiber and roomed with Motz.

In retirement, there could still be a connection. Dave Richardson remembered, “I was in Winnipeg when the Jets were starting up. I had an interest in a sporting goods store. I went to a game and met John Ferguson. After I introduced myself, Fergie said, ‘I know you, Ken Ullyot told me.’” They became friends and Fergie arranged for Dave to do some broadcasting for the Jets; he kept at it for seven years.

There is a reason for the bonds that form. Aside from the shared agony and joy of winning and losing, many players have left home and family behind at a young age. Is it lonely? Joe Kastelic says no. “You

have sixteen comrades, so you aren't alone. You need to be a people person first and an athlete second."

Gerry Sillers helped form the Vancouver Canucks Alumni, a charitable organization that does good works but also acts as a way for former hockey players to get together. A player doesn't have to have played for the Canucks to be welcome and even the most formidable of old foes gets a glad hand. It's a surprise to hear K's from the sixties talking kindly about visiting with Ted Lebioda.

Fort Wayne has a special way of forging those links between the former K's in the city. Rob Laird observed, "I haven't seen it other places as much. The city provides an opportunity for players to settle in after playing hockey. Nobody comes here to settle but it happened. From day one the fans respected you as a player. We were always respected and it felt good. Also there were people here who provided jobs and that's a big part of it." The result is a concentration of former players unlike most other old IHL cities.

In the nineties, Colin Chin, Carey Lucyk, Grant Richison, Kelly Hurd, Steve Fletcher and Ian Boyce were a group with links that now include their children. "It's a comforting feeling when we get together," observes Hurd.

Members of this local hockey community still meet, coach one another's children in midget and help one another out when they need it. Sometimes the links really do form a chain: Colin Chin was named for Colin Lister; Steve Fletcher's son is named for Colin Chin.

Today's Players

In today's UHL, players come and go quickly, often spending only a year with a team before trying their luck elsewhere. There are still fan favorites and games to be remembered.

Captain in the fiftieth season was Brent Gretzky, who has had a varied career since joining the Atlanta Knights in 1992, including a few games in the NHL. The Komets got him on a trade from Port Huron, but he was glad of the chance to play in Fort Wayne. "I knew the rink and it was a nice city. Guys coming up in the UHL see the banners and the retired names, you know what kind of place it is," he said.

Kelly Hurd said, "He can see the ice better than others, sees plays one or two ahead of time. I enjoyed being on the ice with him. The puck would be on your stick and you wouldn't know it. You had to be

careful not to miss the opportunity.” Gretzky is a demanding player, with lots to say, the kind of person who sets the mood and tempo for a game.

Ron Leef remarked on Brent’s habit of whistling on the ice. “When our defense would pick up the puck behind our net, he whistles from the blue line to let them know where he is, to let people know who will take the puck.”

Whistling and talking on the ice is an effective ploy. Brent explains: “Of course, you can hear the players on the other team and they can hear you. There’s also the chance that you might confuse the two. You can use this to your advantage. If I’m back-checking someone, I can say, ‘Drop it, drop it!’ and they might think it’s one of their own players and they will and then I can pick it up. I was trying this and there was one of their players behind me yelling, ‘Don’t! Don’t!’ so it didn’t work. But they lost the puck anyway. I’m a fast talker but I can’t get it out so I’ll whistle. They know it’s my whistle.” Ron Leef says talking on the ice is a fundamental like shooting or passing, “It’s like having a sixth man on the ice. I learned that as a kid.”

Brent’s energy and exuberance are enjoyed by the fans. Asked about his favorite player, Thomas Crum chose Gretzky: “I like it because he tries hard every night.” And Brent himself says, “I owe hockey everything, my kids, my couch, my TV. I love the public, love the autographs, the crowds. I love it all.”

Keli Corpse spent three seasons here and after a slow start was a leading scorer. Hurd said, “He was an unselfish player who put other people ahead of himself. He wants the people beside him to succeed and always gives 100%.” David Franke called him one of the top players skill-wise in the UHL.

Frédéric Bouchard was outstanding for the Komets before moving on to the Milwaukee Admirals, an all-round player with a great shot. A talented offensive defenseman, he could also play forward. In the 1999-2000 season he scored 33 goals and capped that on 2 March 2001 managing what *The News-Sentinel* described as “something amazing, scoring a natural hat trick or three goals in a row during a 4:38 span in the second period.” It was his second hat trick of the season. That game also saw Keli Corpse set a UHL team record by scoring points in 18 consecutive games. Bouchard made the 2000-01 all-star team.

Jim Logan’s second season with the team (2000-01) ended with 25 goals and 56 points. He’s a tough guy who plays a hard nosed game. He’s very strong, almost reckless, with a tendency to get hurt.

On 15 December 2001, Logan had a four-goal game. After fracturing his cheek, he returned on 23 January but disdained wearing a visor. He managed a hat trick that night.

Logan explained what makes a good player: "It's hard to compare people with differing roles. It's not necessarily the number of points. That may be it but other things matter. A team consists of point getters, leaders in the dressing room, hard defensive players every night. You need to know what to expect from each other. There's no way you're going to win anything if you are a bunch of individuals. You gotta work as a team."

Kelly Hurd's five seasons with the Komets were spread over ten years, while he tried out other teams in the AHL, IHL and ECHL. It was almost four seasons, because he'd decided to retire in 1999, but "I got the itch during the summer and I called to say I wanted to come back."

Steve Fletcher described Hurd as a "nice guy, funny and with a great shot. He's a great right wing who can hit the top shelf and turn the red light on." Hurd ended the 1993-94 season with 84 points. A fan said, "He may not have been the most gifted guy on the ice, but he never took a night off." Trainer Joe Franke remembered that Hurd was a great practical joker, "you never knew when the bugger would strike."

The players paid tribute to their coach, Greg Puhalski. Said Logan, "He demands lots from players, has high expectations which is good because he tries to get people to work at their top level. People have more in them and he gets it out of them." Gretzky enjoys Puhalski's practices. "They're great practices, every day, with not much standing around, and I've experienced that too. He wants it all—well, I've never had a coach say, 'Go 50% today.' And he knows when we need a break."

A Komet from the fifties, Bill Richardson, observed, "In recent years we've had really good goalies here." That was especially true during the Teskey years.

Doug Teskey started hockey late, about age nine, because he'd been living in Florida. He became a goalie at twelve, when the team's net-minder was hurt and he filled in during a tournament. He won an award and displaced the coach's son in the nets!

Teskey says he doesn't have a set style, but he also says, "It's a simple game. I don't like to get scored on." A goalie has to be consistent for fifty or sixty games a year. It's easy to be big in certain games and then take a night off, but that's not good enough. Also, "you have to

thrive on the pressure. You all battle like animals to get the puck out, a free-for-all of sticks and elbows. When you're on, everything slows down. When you're nervous, the puck can seem like it's a grenade."

A teammate said, "He can read plays ahead of time. If you score on him in practice, he takes it seriously. He's playing great hockey—games would not be won without him."

Whatever stars the Komets had in the past, or have now, there will always be room for someone new. For many fans, Kelly Miller's arrival from Toledo in the middle of the fiftieth season injected some excitement into the games. He is energetic and fast, skating up and down the ice all the time, making things happen. Eddie Long praised him, saying, "He's hustling out there all the time."

There's always room for another hustler on the ice.

A Second Fifty Years

With fifty eventful years behind them, the team can look forward to another half-century of games, fans, broken sticks and road trips. Win or lose, the people of Fort Wayne will still be cheering at the renovated Coliseum. The players will still be having fun playing the game that matters more to them than the money or the bruises.

If you want proof that Komets games are like coming home for the former players, look to 26 October 2001, when the team celebrated the fiftieth season. A host of Komets came back to mark the anniversary and for one of them, it seemed a good time and place to make a marriage proposal—over the public address system. Terry Pembroke was relieved when Marne Robertson said yes.

In the season that starts the second fifty years—2002-2003—there will be a renovated Coliseum. "It's a whole new deal for the club," says Steve Franke, "And will lead to a new fan base. What a great place! It's modern and up to date. We needed a new place and that's what we're getting. Constant change is necessary in hockey."

There are bonds that link the Komets, whether they are eighteen or seventy-eight. It is a community of men who have Fort Wayne's hockey history in common—they made it, they lived it, they remember it still. It's a link that matters, and will continue to matter.

Kelly Hurd remembers some quiet moments before the games: "The guy who kept the penalty box was an old Komet named Roger Maisonneuve. I would sit with him and he'd tell stories about his days on

the ice. He always had a bag of candy, caramels covered with chocolate and nuts, in the penalty box. I always had two before a game.

“When he died I went to the funeral. I went up to pay my respects and a woman said, ‘I’m the Flying Frenchman’s wife.’ We talked and as I turned to go, Shirley Maisonneuve offered me a candy. There was a bowl of Roger’s chocolate caramels there. So I took one and Shirley said, ‘Aren’t you going to take two?’”

Mitch Maisonneuve, Roger’s son, is a fire fighter. Kelly has recently joined the fire department, too. On the day Kelly graduated from the firefighting academy, Mitch left two of the chocolate caramels on his desk.

That’s how it is in the city where, no matter what the score on the ice, the Komets are still kings.

Index

This is a selective index only. References to players are about them; if they are quoted about another player, they are not indexed. Komets players are indicated in **bold**.

A

Ablett, Jeff, 135
Abousamra, Edward, 190
Adamson, Chuck, 16, 39, 50, 85, 87-88, 92, 95, 96, 98, 184
Aikens, Bert, 69, 95, 97, 98
Albright, Abe, 29
Allison, Dave, 237
Anderson, John, 10, 227-228
Armstrong, George, 149
Ashley, Ernie, 28
Atchison, Don, 134, 137
Attwell, Rob, 204

B

Back, Warren, 36, 62
Bailey, Bob, 89, 99, 105-106, 115, 191, 264
John, 66, 105-106
Baird, Bob, 118, 119
Jim, 67, 264
Baldassari, John, 217, 218
Baldwin, Dale, 131, 181, 182, 192-193, 199, 204, 207, 216, 218
Balon, Chick, 40, 89, 107, 116, 120, 134
Bannerman, Murray, 170, 171
Bartoli, Moe, 8, 16, 63, 95, 97, 118, 119
Baryluk, Ron, 67

Baseotto, Bruno, 201
Bashkirov, Andrei, 255
Bawa, Robin, 207, 226, 231, 237, 256-257
Beauregard, Stephane, 225, 227
Belfour, Eddie, 102
Bentley, Max, 82
Berg, Bill, 249
Ernie, 3, 4, 18, 29, 76
Berghoff, Raymond, 6
Besidowski, Roman, 59
Bezeau, Andy, 26, 257
Billows, Larry, 129, 130, 134
Bishop, Wayne, 76, 204, 214, 242
Blackburn, Fred, 222, 223
Blair, Wren, 160
Blondin, Edgar, 3, 4, 18, 20, 24-25, 74, 130
Bloom, Jimmy, 190
John, 190, 247, 248
Blume, Dennis, 87, 98
Boileau, Marc, 83, 129, 132-133, 135
Boland, Mike, 91, 169
Bonar, Dan, 143, 160, 170, 172-173
Bouchard, Frédéric, 267
Boudreau, Bruce, 186, 227, 234
Bower, Johnny, 87
Bowman, Scotty, 9, 89, 138
Bowness, Bob, 83
Boyce, Ian, 7, 10, 11, 189, 227, 240, 241, 252
Boyd, Jim, 129, 130
Bradley, Walt, 94
Braumberger, Gus, 7, 15, 24, 59, 62, 183, 188, 223
Bremner, Al, 230
Brillant, Pierre, 83
Britt, Bob, 193, 194, 205

Brochu, Stephane, 225
 Brockmeyer, Paul, 47
Brown, Bob, 107
Brownlee, Ray, 16, 137, 159
 Bruce, David, 229
Brunel, Ray, 121
Bucyk, Terry, 159
Bulloch, Nelson, 77, 94, 97, 107,
 114
Burgers, Martin, 13, 56, 182, 207,
 216
Burman, Mike, 122
 Ron, 8, 15, 121
 Burns, David, 143
Burton, Jim, 24, 78, 126, 182,
 211, 219, 265
 Bus trips, 74
 Buscher, Mark, 188
Butsayev, Slava, 255
Butters, Mike, 225, 227, 247
 Byers, Lyndon, 122

C

C-form, 8
 Calendar, 205
Calhoun, Ed, 5, 58
 Callendar, Jock, 52
Camazzola, Tony, 215
 Captain Komet, 232
 Captains, 235
 Cards, 75
Carlson, Jeff, 198, 199, 218
 Carroll, Norm, 79, 233
Cava, Rory, 30, 199-200
Chabot, Frederick, 227
Channell, Craig, 78, 213, 214
 Chase, Bob, 8, 28, 29, 30, 67, 81
 Chernomaz, Rick, 240
 Chevielt, Don, 29
Chibirev, Igor, 233, 245, 253
Chin, Colin, 8, 15, 75, 225, 226,
 235, 238-241, 243, 254,
 266

Cisco, Sam, 222
Clarke, Mike, 182, 201, 204, 264
Clouse, Greg, 158
 Cole, Jack, 145
 Coliseum, 3, 195, 197, 231, 237,
 269
 Comeau, Marcel, 171
 Conn, Pat, 162
Corpse, Keli, 267
 Costello, Jack, 113
 Cottage Flowers, 189
Couturier, Sylvain, 245
 Cox, Rod, 136
 Craig, Don, 104
Crawford, Pete, 216
 Crowdis, Lou, 61, 102
 Crum, Thomas, 267
Currie, Dan, 237

D

Dannenfelser, Randy, 30, 81
Davidson, Lee, 235, 237, 240
 Davis, John, 29
 Defensemen, 21
DeLonge, Gary, 78, 180, 204
Demchuk, Ted, 116, 117
 Desrosiers, Dennis, 101, 140, 208
DiMarco, Vic, 5, 79
 Downs, Pamela, 117
Drysdale, George, 4-5, 6, 18, 28,
 29, 264
Dubchak, Merv, 16, 29, 40, 94, 108-
 111, 186, 248
 Dudley, Rick, 244
Dumas, Claude, 207
Dumba, Al, 169, 170, 175, 176,
 177, 178, 210, 265
Duncanson, Craig, 236
Dunlop, Tim, 218
Dupuis, Guy, 236, 259
 Dyck, Larry, 258

E

Edwards, George, 21

Marv, 60

Ego, Wayne, 135, 136, 155

Elcombe, Kelly, 199

Elliott, Gunnar, 28, 163, 183, 191

Ellis, Harold, 95

Tom, 249

Essensa, Bob, 186, 212, 236, 257

Evans, Kevin, 207

Shawn, 186

Ewasiuk, Terry, 152, 157, 175,
264

F

Fans, 161

Farrish, Dave, 231, 236

Faulkner, Dave, 169

Felix, Chris, 207

Ferguson, John, 40, 44, 60, 62, 63,
64, 65, 265

Fighting, 122

Fines, 40, 77, 148

Fitchner, Bob, 16, 129, 130, 132,
134, 136, 137

Flesh, John, 101

Fletcher, Steve, 7, 11, 122, 142,
185, 189, 226, 229-231,
243, 266

Theresa, 231

Fleury, Jerry, 23

Flu, 79, 100

Fogg, Stan, 60

Fontaine, Lennie, 140

Ford, Gary, 140

Fowler, Bob, 208

Franke, Joe, 242, 245, 249, 250,
251

Franke brothers, 195, 196, 197,
198, 225, 226, 233, 237,
253

Fraser, Kerry, 222

Fry, Dugan, 29

Les, 56

G

Gaber, Steve, 46

Gagné, Jacques, 56, 264

Pierre, 144

Gagnon, Dave, 244

Georges, 182

Galipeau, Roger, 115

Gallmeier, Bud, 32

Chuck, 201

Garant, Sid, 67, 95

Gardner, Gary, 164

Garvin, Ted, 153, 198, 202

Gates, Hilliard, 29

Randy, 94, 120

Gaudreault, Marc, 150

Gengo, Kaye, 233

George, Frank, 29

Gerber House, 17

Gibb, John, 201

Gibson, Doug, 31

Roger, 249

Gilhen, Randy, 78

Gilles, Emil, 70, 87, 265

Gillows, Russ, 116

Ginnell, Pat, 124

Glasscock, John, 244

Goalies, 85, 89, 140

Goldthorpe, Bill, 199

Goodwin, Arlo, 265

Art, 265

Charlie, 265

John, 46, 69, 95, 109, 110, 111,
124, 164, 265

Ken, 182, 265

Gould, Orrin, 37, 57, 61

Graham, Dirk, 200

Don, 30

Marge, 30, 112

Gray, Bob, 90, 107

Gresdal, Gary, 155

Gretzky, Brent, 189, 266, 267
Wayne, 9, 26, 164
Gruhl, Scott, 36, 75, 227, 243,
245-247

H

Haley, Dave, 124
Halter, Howie, 132
Handy, Ron, 218
Hankinson, Peter, 240
Harris, Gus, 30
Harrison, Skeets, 222
Hart, Art, 60, 63
Hartig, John, 95
Hasek, Dominic, 227
Hayes, Garth, 74
George, 83
Hegarty, Mark, 216
Helmets, , 49
Hemmerling, Roy, 64
Henderson, Archie, 208
Hendrickson, Jake, 89
Hextall, Rick, 116, 121
Hilworth, John, 8, 11, 15, 125,
126, 202, 204, 206
Hip check, 91, 153, 155
Hobby House, 68
Hoganson, Paul, 118, 129, 139
Hold Your Own line, 204
Hollett, Steve, 207
Homenuk, George, 247
Hopiavouri, Ralph, 131
Horvath, Tony, 15, 104, 159
Hotels, 77, 78, 79
Houlder, Bill, 207, 217
Howard, Bob, 183
Howe, Gordie, 11, 238
Hrycuik, Jim, 46, 137, 158
Hughes, Phil, 59
Hunter, Marv, 29
Huntington Hornets, 19
Hurd, Kelly, 7, 12, 55, 185,
226, 233, 268, 269

Hustle and Bustle line, 240

I

IHL and UHL, 261
Injuries, 142
Ircandia, Len, 170
Irons, Robbie, 15, 76, 129, 135,
138-141, 149, 170, 171,
199

J

Jablonski, Greg, 101
Jackson, Hal, 37
Jacques, Normand, 99
Jakeman, Barry, 95, 109, 223
Jakubo, Mike, 165
James, Guy, 101
Janaszak, Steve, 176, 198
Janecyk, Bob, 176
Jay, Bob, 185, 243
Jenner, Merlin, 139
Jensen, Darren, 202
David, 207
Jerseys, 51
Jet Line, 109, 118
Johnson, Norm, 59
Johnston, Doug, 159, 160
Hughie, 17
Jonathan, Stan, 122, 151
Jones, Lester, 164
Jordan, Dennis, 33
Joyner, Jim, 191

K

Kahn, Bill, 101
Kaminski, Kevin, 227, 229, 258
Karalis, Tom, 227
Kardash, Mike, 120
Kastelic, Joe, 17, 22, 29, 35-37,
67, 96, 245
Stella, 184
Kazarian, Harry, 153
Keates, Brian, 201, 202

Keating, D'Arcy, 136, 149, 150, 151, 172
Keller, Ralph, 124, 148, 150, 175
Kelly, Bob, 130, 131
Keough, Jim, 118, 139
Kerslake, Doug, 136
Kiefer, Celia, 163
Kiessig, Brant, 30, 180, 198, 199, 200, 218
Kirk, Bob, 158
Kiss, Joe, 108
Knickle, Rick, 246
Kocur, Kory, 234, 243
Kotsopoulos, George, 9, 76, 78, 180, 186, 198, 200, 202, 203, 204, 264
Kukulowicz, Aggie, 60, 66
Kurtenbach, Orland, 133, 153

L

Labianca, Mike, 176
Laird, Rick, 158
Rob, 13, 16, 44, 144, 149, 151, 162, 166, 175, 176, 194, 207, 209-213, 220
Lakso, Bob, 225, 258
Lallo, Moose, 19, 101, 108, 124, 140, 174-176, 178, 180, 186, 218
Lalonde, Bobby, 57, 58
Lambert, Danny, 225, 258, 259
Lane, Gord, 31, 124, 151
Laurin, Steve, 227
Lea, Bruce, 71
Leacock, Ray, 114
Lebioda, Ted, 93, 100, 116
Leblanc, Bill, 58
LeBlanc, Ray, 227
LeCaine, Bill, 100, 108
Leef, Jackson, 91
Ron, 162, 181-183, 189, 202, 265
Legge, Randy, 116

Lekun, Mike, 214
Lister, Colin, 25, 37, 43-44, 74, 84, 173, 193, 211, 266
Loach, Lonnie, 225, 227
Lockett, Ken, 118
Logan, Jim, 8, 14, 267
Long, Eddie, 5, 7, 9, 16, 19, 22, 28, 29, 33-35, 37, 40, 60, 61, 76, 92, 96, 97, 188
Longest Game, 65
Longmuir, Colin, 121
Loos, Jack, 164, 233
Loree, Len, 61
Loser, Jack, 74, 75, 76
Jim, 74, 89
Lucyk, Carey, 7, 14, 143, 207, 224, 225
Lutz, Cristie, 165

M

MacDonald,
Kevin, b. 1955: 241
b. 1966: 241, 243, 260
MacGuigan, Garth, 152
MacMillan, Gary, 161
MacNeil, Bernie, 122, 131, 152, 157
MacPhee, Ian, 122, 152
MacPherson, Murray, 45, 60
Madigan, Con, 29, 60, 61, 62, 66, 70-73
Main Auto, 37, 47, 51
Maisonneuve, Roger, 29, 91, 97, 98-99, 269-270
Shirley, 270
Marcotte, Jacques, 37
Margarit, Lynn, 121
Marquart, Terry, 206
Martin, Matt, 264
Masks, 50
Masterton, Bill, 49

Maxfield, Lloyd, 57, 60, 66, 95,
 108, 145
Maxwell, Stan, 89, 116
May, Darrell, 202
McCaig, Doug, 22, 23, 92
McCallum, Dunc, 60, 67, 121
McCusker, Bob, 10, 16, 40, 41, 45,
 60, 61, 72, 183
McDougall, Terry, 149, 152, 166,
 167, 175, 199, 201, 202,
 210
McGrath, Doug, 217
McKee, Brian, 52, 259
McLaren, Larry, 15
McLay, Bryan, 96, 108
McLeod, Hartley, 19, 23, 29, 59,
 117, 163, 223
 Jim, 102
McLoskey, Kevin, 159
McMeekin, Roy, 27
McNeice, Bob, 150, 156, 175
McNeil, Bob, 10, 16, 19, 27
McSorley, Chris, 211, 214
McVie, Arlene, 54
 Tom, 7, 130, 133
Meier, Ron, 107
Melanchuk, Shorty, 57, 60, 109
Messier, Mitch, 235
Mezin, Andrei, 255
Michayluk, Dave, 246
Middendorf, Max, 240, 260
Miele, Dan, 215
MiG Line, 253
Mikita, Stan, 45
Mikulan, Ray, 98
Mikulchik, Oleg, 255
Milani, Tom, 178
Miller, Bob, 137
 Elmer, 37
 Kelly, 205, 269
 Steve, 229
Millette, Robert, 216, 253

Milne, Andy, 60, 63
Molleken, Lorne, 126, 158
 Montreal Canadiens game, 87
Morganna, 205
Morin, Vic, 13, 215, 216, 220
Morton, Grant, 63, 71
Moscatto, Dino, 101
Motz, Rob, 181, 203, 265
Murphy, Mark, 159
Murray, Rob, 207
Musser, Dean, 189
Myers, Don, 5
 Gary, 145, 146

N

Nathe, Joe, 104, 172
NHL affiliations, 206
Norris, Dave, 10, 13, 16, 122, 149,
 160-161, 165, 170, 177,
 192, 210
Nutrition, 185

O

O'Brien, Puggy, 18
O'Driscoll, Dan, 149
O'Hearn, Bibber, 60
Nipper, 60
Oberlin, Rich, 251
Olsen, Red, 58
Olson, Eddie, 19, 25
On the road, 73
Orban, Bill, 107, 108, 109, 120,
 144
Orr, Bobby, 9, 21, 226, 264
Ouellette, George, 73

P

Paddock, George, 250
Pads, 50, 51
Paradise, Bob, 177
Park, Jim, 202
Passing, 81, 116
Patenaude, Rusty, 129, 130

Patrick, Eugene, 162
Pearson, Jim, 129, 134, 157
 Pelangio, Pete, 121
Pembroke, Terry, 7, 91, 129, 135,
 136, 149, 153-155, 175,
 269
Penasse, Mike, 156, 168, 172, 199
Pepin, Richard, 159
 Perfection Biscuit Company, 237
 Perry, Fred, 171
 Ramon, 3, 4, 17, 25, 194
Phillips, Bob, 202
 Pilling, Gregg, 167-170, 172
 Janis, 210
 Player-coach, 25
 Podolsky, Nels, 23
 Poirier, Doug, 182
Polinuk, George, 11, 51, 248
 Popp, Bohn, 163, 237
 John, 237
Prediger, Ivan, 95, 96, 97, 98,
 108, 118, 119, 223
 Priddy, Marvin, 49, 142, 222
Primeau, Reg, 15, 38, 45, 68, 81,
 93-95, 108, 115, 118,
 264, 265
 Sonja, 54, 94
 Puhalski, Greg, 268
Purinton, Cal, 76, 127-129, 154,
 265
Purves, John, 235, 254, 259

R

Racine, Bruce, 186
Ramsay, Glenn, 52, 53, 54, 60, 61,
 66, 96, 117
Randall, Gerry, 9, 16, 50, 85, 88,
 90, 115, 116, 118, 144
Ray, Derek, 235
Raymond, Alain, 207
Reddick, Pokey, 186, 206, 212,
 240, 241, 242, 244, 245
 Reed, Bob, 32

Referees, 221
Reid, Doug, 116, 117
 Reincke, Terry, 248-249
 Renner, Bob, 32
Repka, Lionel, 60, 79-81, 184, 217
Richard, Jean Marc, 186, 240,
 242, 243, 260
Richardson, Bill, 9, 21, 58
 Dave, 17, 29, 39, 69, 265
Richison, Grant, 260
Rigler, Doug, 7, 13, 16, 78, 143,
 186, 210, 219-220, 265
 Riley, Bill, 150, 151
 Rinks, 102
Rissling, Kelly, 125
Rivard, Bobby, 16, 95, 97, 108-
 110, 112
Robert, François, 158
 Robertson, Marne, 269
Ronan, Dan, 91
Ronson, Len, 19, 37, 58, 60, 61,
 66, 83, 143, 261
Ross, Dave, 202
Rouleau, Michel, 116, 117
 Roy, Roland, 112
Rupp, Duane, 60, 80
 Russell, Cam, 227
 Russians, 151, 254
 Ryan, Charlie, 20, 21
 Jim, 30
Ryder, Dan, 144

S

Sabourin, Ken, 239
Saindon, Paul, 20, 73
Salvucci, Steve, 186, 204, 205
 San Diego Chicken, 204
 Sanders, Harland, 68
Sanscartier, Dan, 202, 253
 Schowe, Robert, 190
Schreiber, Wally, 78, 143, 204,
 206, 210, 214, 219, 220,
 265

Scully, Barry, 91, 176, 179, 180,
 205
 Linda, 180
 Sebring, Blake, 33
 Shady Nook, 187
Shafronov, Konstantin, 255
Sharp, Gary, 97, 98
Shaw, Jim, 118
Sheremeta, Dean, 133, 135, 137,
 157, 166
 Shero, Fred, 39, 110, 169
Shmyr, Brian, 117
 Paul, 11, 116, 117, 144
 Shock, Argie, 32
 Shoda, John, 62
Shoebottom, Bruce, 207
 Shooting, 90, 222
 Shore, Eddie, 45, 59, 92, 93, 264
Short, Bill, 23
 Shutt, Byron, 199
Sillers, Gerry, 40, 84, 115, 116,
 183, 266
Sims, Al, 195, 208, 225, 226, 233,
 245
 Sinnett, Bill, 113
 Sirois, Rich, 200, 201
 Sitko, Emil, 47
 Skates, 48
 Slapshot (Film), 151
 Slater, Terry, 103
 Slota, Frank, 106
Smith, Craig, 251
 Dave, 185, 245
 Glen, 21
 Oral, 153
 Sneddon, Bobby, 113
St. Croix, Rich, 206
 Stange, Ike, 191
Stanutz, George, 7, 9, 10, 17, 21,
 24
Stas, Sergei, 255
Staub, Bill, 90, 118

Stephens, Dan, 139
 Stewart, Cal, 29
 Paul, 222
 Sticks, 45, 46, 47, 48
Stockman, Steve, 201
Stone, Art, 20, 24, 29, 37, 44, 45,
 57, 60, 67, 70
Strasser, Paul, 60
 Strong, Ollie, 29
Strueby, Todd, 217, 256
 Stuckey, Jerry, 142
 Stuttmatter, Earl, 222
 Superstitions, 185
Sutcliffe, Eric, 121
Sutyla, Ken, 183
Swain, Garry, 129

T

Tabaracci, Rick, 227
 Tantardini, Paul, 104, 200
Tarnow, Ken, 145
Tebbutt, Greg, 218
 Teeth, 143
Teskey, Doug, 7, 9, 10, 13, 268
Tessier, Ray, 156
Therrien, Jean, 62, 67
 Thomas, Dave, 68
Thompson, John, 107
Thomson, Floyd, 119
 Terry, 137, 149, 158
Thornson, Len, 8, 12, 19, 37, 44,
 60, 61, 68, 81, 82-84,
 97, 108, 145, 186, 261
 Three man line, 21, 204, 219
Timmins, Jack, 5, 18, 114
Toffolo, Mark, 199
 Toledo, 100, 103, 198, 202, 223
Tomalty, Glen, 199
 Toporowski, Kerry, 230
 Torchetti, John, 236
 Torresan, Carlo, 151
 Trainers, 247
 Training camps, 4

Trognitz, Willie, 104, 199
 Trottier, Guy, 122
Tsyplakov, Vladimir, 235, 254, 255
Tudor, Rob, 152, 158, 176, 177,
 178, 265
 Tuer, Al, 207
Turnbull, Ross, 13, 19, 27
 Turner, Bob, 24
 Turner Cup, 1963, 94
 1965, 107
 1973, 134
 1993, 240

U

Ullyot, Donna, 194
 Kate, 135
 Ken, 194, 236
 and IHL, 43
 and newspapers, 41
 as coach, 9, 34, 38, 63,
 82, 88, 96, 133
 as psychologist, 40
 first contract, 4
 first impression, 25
 first year, 37, 38
 recruiting players, 42
 retirement, 193
 suspension, 132
Ron, 10, 62, 101, 135, 145-148,
 201, 204-205, 216
 Vi, 111, 250

V

Van Orman, Harold, 3, 4, 44
Veysey, Sid, 149, 150, 160
Voykin, Andy, 58, 59, 60, 61, 71,
 72, 74

W

Waite, Jimmy, 227
Walker, Brian, 135, 156
Walmsley, Ivan, 18, 58
Waslawski, Norm, 92, 96, 98, 265

Watson, Billy, 3, 20, 25
 Webster, Gertrude, 163
 Welker, Bill, 250-251
 David Dan, 194, 195, 196, 207,
 209, 213
 Western Union line, 175, 210
 Wetzel, Carl, 61
Wharton, Len, 5, 56
White, Alton, 84, 114, 115, 144,
 183, 191
Whiteside, Cy, 62, 71, 105, 107,
 108
Whittal, Bryan, 15
Wickenheiser, Doug, 235, 259
 Wiegmann, Ruth, 162
Wilcox, Jim, 132, 264
Wilkenson, Dave, 159
Willard, Rod, 200
Willeff, Paul, 233, 245
Wilson, Jim, 17
 Pat, 19, 20, 21, 26, 36
 Wissman, Steve, 247, 250
 Wittliffe, Phil, 211
 Wonder Line, 116
 Wood, Alex, 3, 4, 6, 16, 17
Woody, 69
 WOWO, 28
Wright, Betty, 184
 Ken, 149, 150
 Ted, 15, 29, 55, 97, 113, 116,
 126, 148, 184, 186, 188,
 264
Wywrot, Lois, 27
 Pete, 14, 16, 22, 26, 27

Y

Yackel, Ken, 94, 97, 98
 Yaworski, Laurie, 136
Young, Gary, 69, 70, 96, 106, 265

Z

Zanier, Reno, 51, 55, 60, 62, 86,
190, 265

Zanussi, Ron, 152, 160

Zemlak, Richard, 230

Zimmerman, Dick, 221

Flossie, 222, 232

Zinchenko, Boris, 253

Zollner Pistons, 3

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the Longest Game and the penalty shot that missed
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Mike Penasse

RYAN TAYLOR is the author of a number of historical books, and handbooks on genealogy. He is a genealogical librarian at the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne. He went to school with Bobby Orr.

DON F. GRAHAM is a noted Fort Wayne sports historian and avid collector of local sports memorabilia. He is self employed as a personnel and labor relations consultant. Although he played shuffleboard with Bobby Rivard and Reggie Primeau, he did not go to school with Bobby Orr.

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